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Boys & Girls Club of Dane County to receive seven-figure grant to boost AVID/TOPS program

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Photo taken by: Ogechi Emechebe

Over 3 million dollars was donated to the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County to fund AVID/TOPS, a college preparatory program.

On Tuesday morning, the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County announced plans of a seven-figure donation to the organization to increase academic support for area students.

American Family Insurance Dreams Foundation, the Milwaukee Bucks and the Burke Foundation gathered at the Boys and Girls Club Taft St. location to share their significant investments and partnerships to help grow AVID/TOPS, a college preparatory program that helps boost graduation rates and college enrollment for minority, low-income and first generation students.

American Family Insurance donated one million dollars over five years to support AVID/TOPS and the Burke foundation is granting 2.3 million dollars over the next three years.

Michael Johnson, CEO of BGCDC, said the multi-million dollar grant is the largest ever given to a college preparatory program in the Madison and Verona school districts.

"It's a seven-figure gift so we're talking millions. What's really exciting about the announcement is the performance of our kids," Johnson said. "We have almost 300 kids that are African-American in the program and they are showing an increase in performance and the Latino kids are showing an increase. We want to let the community know to continue to support the program and the kids."

In its partnership with the Madison School District, the AVID/TOPS program works to narrow achievement gaps, helps students stay on track for graduation and prepares them for college. The program offers mentoring, tutoring, internships and college scholarships.

MMSD Superintendent Jennifer Cheatham, Dane County Executive Joe Parisi, Sara Goldrick-Rab, professor of educational policy studies and sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and representatives from the Madison and Verona school districts were among those who attended.

Goldrick-Rab, the founding director of the Wisconsin HOPE Lab, said they've studied the program over time and found that students involved have better academic records than those who are eligible to participate but don't. 94 percent of AVID/TOP students graduate high school and 73 percent go on to college, compared to 62 percent of qualified students who aren't in the program.

"One of our big outcomes that we always measure is, do they take AP and honors courses at higher rates than other students? It's important because when colleges look at who's going to get into their schools they just don't look at a student's GPA because it could be good, but it could also be in really easy classes," Goldrick-Rab said. "They often look to see if you took hard classes where you challenged yourself, so we have consistently found over time that AVID students are much more likely to take AP and honors classes."

She also added AVID students tend to have fewer absences.

Norma Samaniego, a West High School senior and AVID/TOPS student, said prior to joining the program she didn't care about her education. Her GPA was below 2.0 and she didn't have any academic support in or outside her home. She decided to give AVID/TOPS a try her freshman year and ever since then she's gotten the guidance and resources needed to excel academically. She has also pulled up her GPA to a 3.1.

"I've learned so much since being a part of it and the the teachers give you all the support you need to achieve your goals," Samaniego said. "Before this I didn't care about my education and thought 'what chance do I have in this world as a minority?' Neither of my parents finished college so I had no support at all. But now I know as long as you work hard and put your mind to it you can achieve anything. I have gotten the help and mentoring I needed."

Samaniego plans to attend the UW-Madison or UW-Milwaukee for college.

A 2012-2013 AVID/TOPS assessment showed students of low-income backgrounds earned a 2.66 GPA compared to 2.42 by low-income students not enrolled. The study showed the program boosted college readiness and enrollment.

Also included in Tuesday's announcement was news that the Milwaukee Bucks are planning to give away 30 to 50 tickets to each of its home games as a reward for students who are showing improvement in school, Johnson said.

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