

Students in AVID program take charge of their learning and futures

One of the floor-to-ceiling cabinets in T.J. Spina's class at Mebane Middle School is covered with hand-made college pennants. They're the work of students in the school's AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program, and they represent those colleges and universities the students hope to attend one day.

"When I first got here I didn't even want to go to college, and now I'm really motivated to go," said 8th-grader Michael Contreras.

AVID is a nationally-recognized, research-based program that establishes high expectations and promotes college and career readiness, particularly among students who are typically underrepresented in higher education. It was implemented this year at Mebane, Santa Fe and Gainesville high schools and Westwood Middle School. Students give up an elective to attend the daily AVID class, which offers academic support, note-taking, organizational and other practical skills--long with plenty of motivation.

Spina says some of his students were apprehensive at first about participating in a new and unfamiliar program but are now fully invested.

"Teachers across the campus tell me that the students' organization has improved, their grades and test scores are increasing, and their overall desire to be in class and learn has also increased," he said.

While Spina is the official 'teacher' of the AVID class, he considers himself more of a facilitator. That also goes for the community volunteers who have served as tutors in the class since the beginning of the school year.

Bob Purdy, Safety Specialist with the City of Alachua, said he wasn't sure how he could be 'plugged in' to the AVID program, but he knew there was a need for adult volunteers, particularly men. He decided to take a leap of faith and sign up.

"It's been a huge inspiration for me to be a part of such a great program," he said. "I'm so encouraged about playing a small role inspiring these young students to exceed their expectations."

And while adults do play a critical role in the AVID classroom, Spina says the students themselves are often the most effective teachers. They typically work in small groups, teaching, learning from and motivating each other.

"Nobody gets away with doing less," he said. "They hold each other accountable, they all do the same level of work and they really do push each other."



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Eighth-grader Jalyssa Johnson says it's often easier for her to turn to peers to help her with academic concepts she doesn't understand.

"Sometimes if I was with a teacher and I was confused I was reluctant to raise my hand," she said. "But with other kids, I know I can just be straight up. They help you and you help them."

AVID is one of a wide variety of strategies outlined in Alachua County Public Schools' equity plan to address the achievement gap and raise the performance of all students. The district plans to expand the program into Howard Bishop Middle, Shell Elementary and Hawthorne Middle/High School next year. A team from Bishop recently visited Mebane to see the program in action and talk to this year's students, many of whom have already been recruiting the school's 6th-graders to take advantage of AVID next year.

"I love it," said 8th-grader Dontrell Jenkins. "It makes me want to achieve more. If I want to do something in life, I feel like I can do it."

Maintaining and possibly expanding the program at Mebane and other local schools means more adult volunteers will be needed to serve as tutors. Rodolfo Valladares, Public Services Director with the City of Alachua, volunteers with AVID weekly and says his experience has been 'absolutely fantastic.'

"I come here with the intention to inspire the kids and encourage them to reach higher and when I leave I'm the one encouraged," he said. "The kids are absolutely remarkable. It gives me confirmation that we have a good future moving forward."

Anyone interested in volunteering with the AVID program is encouraged to contact the school at (386) 462-1648 or email principal Manda Bessner at bessnemg@gm.sbac.edu.

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