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Program targets 'average' students

Backers say AVID will boost college enrollment of underperforming students

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Pioneer Press

Chue Vang was a middle-school student in California who took easy classes because he knew he could do well in them. He figured he would wind up going to college, but he was in no hurry to challenge himself academically.

That changed when a teacher encouraged him to enroll in a program called AVID, which he says showed him he could succeed in tough classes.

He continued to take upper-level courses when he got to high school, and he went on to earn an education degree at the University of Minnesota. This fall he starts his first year of teaching at Humboldt High School in St. Paul.

Chue Vang credits AVID with boosting his self-esteem and career aspirations. It taught him, he says, "(that) I should push myself harder because I see all these benefits."

St. Paul school officials are hoping for a lot of stories like Chue Vang's as they roll out AVID — which stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination — at seven schools this year.

The goal of the program, which began 25 years ago in San Diego, is to get more kids ready for college.

It is aimed at B and C students, who can tend to drift along in school as attention is focused on the top performers and on the academically failing.

"I think it's important to focus on this group because for so long we've let these students get by in not reaching their full potential," said Darlene Fry, a former professor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire who was hired to run St. Paul's AVID program. "We don't often have

programs that focus on students in the middle."

The program makes a special effort to reach out to low-income and minority students, and to those who would be the first in their families to go to college — as was true for Chue Vang.

In AVID, students sign up for both an academically rigorous class — such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes — and a class in which they learn good study habits, time management and other skills and also receive coaching from university students.

Kent Pekel, the district's executive director of research and development, says the immediate goal of bringing in AVID — for which the district is paying about \$115,000 in the first year and less in subsequent years — is to get more students to sign up for honors courses like Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes. (About 38 percent take such courses, according to data from 2003-04). That should translate down the road into higher college enrollments, he said.

AVID aligns with the district's philosophy that student success comes from more than aptitude, Pekel said. The idea is "everyone can get it, but they have to work at it, and the school has to organize to help them work at it," he said.

The program is being used in more than 2,200 middle and high schools in 36 states and 15 countries, according to AVID's Web site. St. Paul and Brooklyn Center are the first Minnesota districts to use it.

Pekel said if AVID is successful this year, the next step would be to offer it in every high school, middle school and junior high in the district.

AVID has gotten good press nationally, and its claims of success are startling: 98

percent of AVID students graduate, and 95 percent enroll in college, according to the program's Web site.

In St. Paul, the graduation rate is about 72 percent, and 58 percent of graduating seniors enrolled in an institution of higher education the semester after graduation, according to figures from 2003.

About 500 St. Paul seventh-, eighth- and 10th-graders are expected to participate in AVID this year, and a group of incoming eighth-graders and their parents gathered at Battle Creek Middle School one night last week to learn more about it.

Steven Meade liked what he heard about the number of AVID kids who go on to college. That's something he wishes he had done, he said, and something he intends for his eldest, Katrina, and his two other children.

Katrina, who took some advanced classes last year as a seventh-grader, said she plans to enroll in AVID and looks forward to "just getting challenged more."

"Actually, it sounds very fun," she said.

WHAT IS AVID?

Advancement Via Individual Determination, a program started in 1980 in San Diego aimed at preparing academically average students for college.

How does it work?

AVID students are enrolled in rigorous courses and receive support to help them succeed.

Where will it be used this year in St. Paul?

Arlington, Harding, Highland Park and Central high schools; Battle Creek Middle School; Ramsey and Murray junior high schools.

To learn more: www.avidonline.org