

# Boys & Girls Club, Madison schools team up more to boost achievement

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M.P. KING — State Journal  
East High School senior Ma Yang leads a group discussion of an algebra problem during an AVID/TOPS class on Thursday. The program, a collaboration between the Madison School District and the Boys & Girls Club, is a key part of the organization's planned \$15 million, six-year expansion. Also pictured clockwise from Yang, program coordinator Langston Ewers, tutor Margaret Swaney, and seniors Awa Fofana, Jennifer Arroyo-Olvera, Herne Yawo and Kyla Porter.

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**Boys & Girls Club of Dane County plans ambitious program to improve graduation rates**



The Boys & Girls Club of Dane County plans to raise \$15 million over the next six years to improve the graduation rates of low-income and ... [Read more](#)

During her sophomore year at Madison East High School, Awa Fofana was facing a personal health crisis and her parents' divorce when a teacher recommended she join the AVID/TOPS program.

Now a senior and headed to UW-Madison next fall to study nursing, Fofana credits the program, a partnership between the Madison School District and Boys & Girls Club of Dane County, with helping her succeed where other students facing similar challenges at home often do not.

"It's hard to find someone who would support you through times like that," Fofana said. "AVID/TOPS) has been that push to do the things I need to do."

AVID/TOPS — a college preparatory program for students in the academic middle — is one of the central pieces of an ambitious \$15 million expansion the local Boys & Girls Club is planning over the next six years.

The expansion represents a shift for the organization from recreational after-school programming to academic support services. It comes as the School District renews its focus on raising low-income and minority student achievement, and reflects increasing ties between the club and the district.

The organization has already raised more than \$2.2 million toward its goal, including \$2 million to fund AVID/TOPS for three more years from School Board member Mary Burke's family's foundation.

"We have great needs in this community," Burke said. "The more funding and support we can bring to educating our students, the better off we'll be."

The \$15 million won't go to building new clubhouses in under-served areas, like the Boys & Girls Club headquarters that opened in 1999 in the former South Madison Neighborhood Club or the Allied Drive community center opened in 2006.

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Instead, the funds will pay for tutors and other club staff to provide more academic support services at schools and community centers, during and after the school day and as part of an expanded summer program.

Last fall, the national organization designated Madison's four main high schools as club extension sites, requiring them to have a Boys & Girls Club office and staff member and making them eligible for national grants. They join about 1,300 other school-based Boys & Girls Club sites, many of which are in larger cities, said Jim Clark, president of Boys & Girls Clubs of America and the former head of the Milwaukee chapter.

"They are definitely a leader in terms of where they are for the size market and size organization," Clark said. "They are an innovator and a leader in the country in many ways with what they're doing around their academic success model and expansion of that."

#### Life saver

Dane County club CEO Michael Johnson credits a Boys & Girls Club in Chicago with saving his life, but for all the evenings he spent there, he still grew up not being able to read or write.

Johnson, who was recently named one of the top five Boys & Girls Club executives in the nation, wants to quadruple the number of young people receiving club services to 10,000. In addition to adding hundreds of students to AVID/TOPS, which provides in-school paid tutoring, the growth is expected to come from mergers with other similar-sized organizations, providing academic programs in local schools and contracting with local municipalities to operate programs out of existing community centers.

When Johnson took over the organization three years ago, he oversaw a \$1.1 million budget. That amount has grown to \$3.1 million this year and is projected to grow to \$7 million by 2018.

The Boys & Girls Club model has provided young people a safe, after-school environment to counter negative influences like gangs and drugs. Johnson also sees the organization filling in the gaps for low-income students who don't have stable, two-parent households with the resources for private tutors, summer programs or college tours.

"As an after-school provider, we're not going to transform these kids' lives by just providing services at the school," Johnson said. "We have to be with them during the school day to support their academic needs as well."

The Boys & Girls Club is one of several community organizations focusing more resources on local schools. The United Way of Dane County plans to spend \$4.7 million on education-related programs this year. It also deploys about 1,750 volunteer tutors whose time is estimated to be worth another \$1.4 million.

"The Boys & Girls Club's increased ambition and focus on aligning education strategies with their after-school programming makes sense with the success they've had with AVID/TOPS," United Way president Leslie Ann Howard said.

But Urban League of Greater Madison president Kaleem Caire, who sought unsuccessfully for School District support to launch a charter school for low-income and minority students, said the Boys & Girls Club should be careful not to deviate from its recreational mission.

"If it focuses too much on academics, then these kids who grow up poor, all they're doing is going to school — but going to school for what?" Caire said. "(The Boys & Girls Club) can play an essential role in addressing the achievement gap by doing what it's doing well."

Johnson said the organization will continue to offer recreational programming, but students need a holistic approach that also emphasizes good citizenship, healthy lifestyle and academic excellence.

"We're not deviating from kids coming in to shoot pool and play basketball," Johnson said. "They're still going to have those opportunities to participate in a fun environment. But when they come here, we make sure they can read and write."

#### Early results promising

Unlike Caire's charter school proposal, the School Board and district officials have embraced the AVID/TOPS program. The Verona School District also has adopted the unique model.

AVID, or Advancement Via Individual Determination, is a national model developed in San Diego in 1980 and geared toward students in the academic middle whose parents may not have college experience.

TOPS, or Teens of Promise, is a Boys & Girls Club of Dane County program that provides tutoring, internships and college visits to AVID students. The program employs 47 paid tutors and seven full-time staff in schools.

East was the first school to use the AVID/TOPS model in 2008 and the other four high schools added it the following year. It now serves 563 students.

The district expanded the AVID program to middle school this year and paired it with the Boys & Girls Club's College Club program, which began in 2010. Participants as early as first grade take field trips to UW-Madison and other campuses to get them thinking about college. The program employs five full-time staff and 17 paid tutors.

Last week the district released the latest results of a UW-Madison study that has found low-income black and Latino students who participate in the AVID/TOPS program have higher grades and attendance rates, lower behavioral referrals and are more likely to participate in advanced placement courses than similar peers.

Eleni Schirmer, a graduate student and author of the study, said early results suggest the program is having an impact, but additional research is needed.

"The students frequently talk about what it's like to be in the AVID family," Schirmer said. "You're spending time together, you're struggling together, and sometimes that makes a difference."

**Tags** Achievement Gap, Education, Boys And Girls Club, Madison East High School, Boys And Girls Club Of Dane County, Boys And Girls Clubs Of America, Michael Johnson, Awa Fofana, Kaleem

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