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

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.

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.

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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.

AVID/TOPS is part of a hybrid model that’s spreading from the Madison area to the rest of the country.

“Families of color and those of lower income are being underserved,” said Fofana, who is 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.

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“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.”

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"The students frequently talk about what it's like to be in the AVID family," Schirmer said. "You're having an impact, but additional research is needed.

Eleni Schirmer, a graduate student and author of the study, said early results suggest the program places students in higher placement courses than similar peers.

Last week the district released the latest results of a UW-Madison study that has found low-income students who participate in the AVID/TOPS program are more likely to participate in advanced placements, attend school with higher attendance rates, lower behavioral referrals and are more likely to graduate and attend college.

The district expanded the AVID program to middle school this year and paired it with the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County'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.

The district added it the following year. It now serves 563 students.

East was the first school to use the AVID/TOPS model in 2008 and the other four high schools in the district expanded the model in 2009. It now serves 747 students.

The Boys & Girls Club of Dane County, which oversees the program, also expanded it this year. It now serves 2,000 students.

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.

"They're still going to have those opportunities to participate in a fun environment. But when they come here, we want them ready to read and write," Johnson said. "We have to be with them during the school day to support their academic needs as well."

"AVID/TOPS is a great program. It's a great way to provide the additional support that kids need," Johnson said. "We think it's something that kids need to be successful in school."

"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 employs about 1,750 volunteer tutors whose time is estimated to be worth another $1 million."

"The Boys & Girls Club is a leader in terms of where they are for the size market and size organization," 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 leader in the country in many ways with what they're doing around their academic, civic engagement and expansion of that."

Life saver

Dane County club CEO Michael Johnson credits a Boys & Girls Club in Chicago with saving his life.

Johnson, who was recently named one of the top five Boys & Girls Clubs executives in the nation, wants to quadruple the number of 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 enrollments with other non-school 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 of Dane County has a $1.4 million budget and operates programs in local schools and contracting with local municipalities to operate programs out of existing community centers. The district added it the following year. It now serves 563 students.

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