

## Program provides a gentle push

### College becomes reality in elective course that teaches study skills

By KRISTINE HUGHES  
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In ninth grade, Jarvis Cole was a C student who frequently had trouble finishing homework and getting to class on time with all the right books.

Everyone always told him he could do better, and he wanted to.

He just didn't know how.

Fortunately for him, that was the year that AVID came to the Lake Highlands Freshman Center and several other junior high campuses in the Richardson school district.

AVID – Advancement Via Individual Determination – is an elective course for students deemed capable of completing a college-prep graduation plan but who need support to succeed. This year, the district expanded the program to six more schools, making it available at all Richardson junior high and high schools.

Through the program, Jarvis developed organizational and study skills that helped him raise his grades to A's and B's. He also received mentoring and tutoring in the pre-Advanced Placement subjects he enrolled.

"I'm not the perfect student but I try hard, and that's what helps me get through," said Jarvis, 16. "I don't feel like I'm the role model or the star. I'm just showing that it's possible."

Now the Lake Highlands High junior is taking three AP courses – physics, pre-calculus and U.S. history – which can earn him college credit or advanced status at college.

That's fairly typical of students who take AVID, said Eileen Friou, the district's AVID coordinator.

Ninety-seven percent of last year's AVID students in Richardson took at least one pre-AP or AP class, while only 49 percent of all students at schools that had AVID took such classes.

In addition, most AVID students take more AP courses and increase their grade-point average each year they are in the program, Ms. Friou said.

"Just telling students to do better isn't enough," she said. "AVID tells them they can do better and shows them how."

District officials point to increasing enrollment and improved attendance, grades and test scores as evidence of the program's success.

Ms. Friou reports that enrollment went from 168 students the first year to 1,200 this year; attendance is about 2 percentage points higher for AVID students than for each school as a whole; and TAKS passing

rates for state math and reading tests are 8 to 15 percentage points higher for AVID students than for each grade level overall.

The program costs about \$400,000 per year, or about \$300 per child for 2005-06. As the program expands, the cost per child will decrease, Ms. Friou said.

Richardson is one of 59 Texas school districts that offer AVID, and more are adding the program annually.

The Carrollton-Farmers Branch school district launched it at four schools this year, and Plano is planning to kick it off at nine campuses next year.

Mark Allen, Plano's director of student services, said district leaders were sold by the success they've seen in Richardson and other area districts as well as around the state and country.

Several visited Richardson classrooms.

"The level of cognition that's going on is amazing," he said. "These are students that are really excelling. You hear the stories, but when you see it happening, it's very impressive."

He said he considers the program's support system a major strength – especially for students whose parents haven't been to college or don't know how to help their children "traverse that pathway."

"In Plano we already have a significant number of students going to college, but as our district changes we want to maintain that college-going culture," Mr. Allen said. "We also are looking at closing the achievement gaps, and this is part of the effort to do that."

Ms. Friou said the class makeup usually reflects the school's demographics.

Students are selected based on their state test scores, academic potential, citizenship and attendance as well as other factors such as socioeconomic status and whether they will be the first in their family to attend college.

The course covers everything from where to sit in class to how to take notes, fill out college applications and get along with others. Tutors, usually local college students paid by the hour, reinforce the academics.

"We just watch students blossom," Ms. Friou said. "The ones who wouldn't even raise their hands the first year are the ones who will be running the world in a few years."

Sanada Fields, 16, a Lake Highlands High junior, said she always planned to go to college but discovered she could get a head start by taking AP classes. However, she worried about enrolling in them and failing, so AVID gave her the confidence to try.

"I always felt like I wanted to challenge myself, but I never had the courage because I felt my grades would just drop," she said.

They didn't, and now she's looking at the possibility of attending business school at Southern Methodist University or the University of North Texas and becoming a real estate entrepreneur.

"I always knew I was going to succeed," she said, "but AVID just pushes you to your potential."



LARA SOLT / DMN

Tierra Scott, a seventh-grader at Liberty Junior High School in the Richardson district, practices note-taking in Advancement Via Individual Determination, a program designed to put students on the college track. Gary Shu is at left.