

JUNTOS: Together Realizing Our Potential

AVID National Conference 2009

By Maria B. Roberts, Ed.D

The Marriot Rivercenter in San Antonio, Texas, once again, provided the setting for the yearly National AVID Conference. The picturesque city's environment added an appropriate flavor to the "junta" (meeting) spotlighting the need to work together to increase the academic achievement of one of the fastest-growing minority groups in the United States public school system. The conference participants were surrounded by Mexican culture, not only at the conference, but throughout the city's typical tourist attractions, its restaurants, and most importantly, its people. As the Spanish word "JUNTOS" implies, "Together" everyone involved in the conference would leave ready to realize their potential in their respective roles at their schools. Another theme recurred throughout the conference—advocacy for underserved students. The following is a description of select sessions to provide an overview of the topics enjoyed by the JUNTOS attendees.

The Hispanic Achievement Gap

Why was the conference directed toward increasing the achievement of Hispanic students? Each year, the AVID organization evaluates data to monitor the effectiveness of its program and to address new issues in student achievement throughout the United States. Currently approximately 17% of American students are of Hispanic ethnicity. When Hispanic students enter an American classroom, they bring with them pre-determined obstacles toward achievement based on their socioeconomic and ethnic minority status. Zill and West (2000) discern that the education of the mother, whether the family receives welfare assistance, whether the child lives in a single-parent household, and whether the student's first language is not

English are critical factors for a student's success in school and for his projected socioeconomic status as an adult. Other studies show that the two main determinant factors for student success in school are the parents' education and the family's socioeconomic status (Cohen, Raudenbush, & Loewenberg-Ball, 2000). Greenwalk, Hedges, & Laine (1996) add that a student's ethnicity and their socioeconomic circumstances are also factors in predicting whether the student will attend college and what his expected earnings will be as an adult. In addition to belonging to an ethnic minority, many Hispanic students come from an economically disadvantaged single-parent home, have parents with little or no education, and speak a language other than English, thereby placing them at risk for underachievement even before entering school. According to the Education Commission of the States (2004):

Hispanic students remain significantly more likely than White students to enter kindergarten unprepared for learning, to have to repeat a grade, and to drop out of school. And while, today, Hispanic students who finish high school are just as likely to enroll in college as white high school graduates, they are only about half as likely to go on to earn a bachelor's degree. (p.1)

A decisive achievement gap exists for the minority group projected to comprise 25% of the total population of the United States by the year 2050 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000). The AVID JUNTOS Conference addressed this lagging achievement of the Hispanic student population.

Advocacy and JUNTOS: Keynote Address

The keynote speaker was introduced by Granger Ward, Executive Vice-President of AVID, who voiced the education system's moral responsibility to close the achievement gap which exists between minority groups and their White counterparts in school. He emphasized

the need to move away from the deficit model of educating students of color or poverty, and instead ensuring all students are college ready by providing a rigorous curriculum for them all.

Keynote Speaker, Ms. Russlynn Ali, the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education. As Secretary Arne Duncan's primary adviser on civil rights, is responsible for enforcing U.S. civil rights of students in any and all educational institutions receiving federal funding. The JUNTOS program chose Ms. Russlynn, a lawyer and former educator, because of her dedication to equality and fairness in obtaining a quality education for all students and her commitment to improving the academic achievement of all students, especially Latinos, African Americans, and disadvantaged students. Beginning with the keynote speaker's address, all sessions focused on the education of the fastest-growing minority group within the U.S. public school system. In her speech, Ms. Ali emphasized all educators' legal and moral responsibility to provide a quality education for all students because four out of every ten jobs of the future would require some type of advanced knowledge and skills. Soft-spoken, but assertive, she reiterated the statistics typical of Hispanic students, such as coming from low socioeconomic households, comprising 80% of the English Language Learners in the country, and having only a 7% graduation rate from college. She emphasized the need to identify the most effective teachers on a campus and placing them where they are most needed, which is before a class of underserved children, such as Latinos, and that there must be commitment from everyone to ensure student success because it would not happen without the involvement of every level of the educational system.

Ms. Russlyn reminded all conference participants that federal legislation mandates that there "must be meaningful access to rigorous school programs" for all students, that parents must be involved in the schools, and that "districts will be investigated for violations" when they do

not comply with these legal requirements. She also warned everyone how intrusive assessments can become if the assessments are not scheduled around school schedules and needs. She relayed the federal government's commitment to alleviating some of the financial obstacles faced by Hispanic students. That commitment, she noted, resulted in Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) receiving three hundred million more dollars than last year to provide financial aid to Latinos, who are noted to receive the smallest amount of financial aid in the U.S. Eliminating the achievement gap for Latinos and all underserved students should not be "an abstract idea, but a personal mission for school leaders. And administrators must model the behaviors, the commitment, and the actions needed to assist students to be successful." She ended her session by relating that although immigration was an important issue for most parents, a greater concern for parents was that schools assist their children to reach academic success in order to improve their employment opportunities. She stated, "Everyone needs to keep an eye on the problem, not just the federal government, not just the state, not just the superintendent, and not just the principal, everyone needs to work on eliminating the achievement gap." Spanish translation, JUNTOS.

What the Research Says

Ms. Ali's message echoed the findings of studies conducted within Texas school districts. Collaboration (working juntos), an important component for student success, was identified by various researchers as a common practice of schools that produced high academic achievement for all their students. The studies corroborated previously established positive correlations among high student achievement and effective leadership, data-driven focused instruction, and the presence of collaborative staff that love their students and feel an obligation to ensure their success (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; Fullan, 1999; Reyes, Scribner, and Paredes-Scribner, 1999;

Scheurich, Skrla, & Johnson, 2000a; Washington School Research Center, 2003; Roberts, 2008).

Once again, the JUNTOS theme was so apropos to helping increase Hispanic student achievement.

Hispanic underachievement remains a perpetual source of concern, as the magnitude of that student population and their eventual impact on economic conditions of the country is ever increasing. The following are statistics taken from the National Center for Education Statistics (2003) based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress for various years:

- 1) Hispanics consistently score below White students at all grade levels in reading and in math.
- 2) Hispanics students who complete high school test at the level of White thirteen-year-olds in reading and in writing.
- 3) Only 14% of Hispanic fourth graders are able to meet the proficient or advanced ratings in reading, while 57% could not meet the basic rating, and 29% can meet only the basic rating.
- 4) Less than 10% of Hispanic eighth graders meet the proficient or advanced rating in math and 60% scored below the basic rating. The remaining 30% meet only the basic rating.
- 5) Although almost 20% of the nations' enrolled students in the U.S. are Hispanic, only 10% of the college enrollment is such, and only 6% of the college graduates are Hispanic.
- 6) Compared to White students, Hispanics remain perpetually less prepared for kindergarten, continue to have higher retention rates, have higher expulsion and suspension rates, and have higher dropout rates.

Because current Hispanic first graders will comprise the work force for the American Baby Boomers within the next twelve to sixteen years, and because Hispanics comprise 65% of

the Limited English Proficient students in U.S. schools, this ethnic group's academic success must be addressed to ensure a brighter economic future, both for the students themselves and for American society as a whole.

The Featured Speaker

Macho Burro, *Genius* and *Rain of Gold*, what do they have in common? The two books are the works of famous and best-seller author Victor Villasenor, who happened to be the featured speaker of the 2009 National AVID Conference. The conference program stated, "Victor brings a fresh perspective to a number of universal themes, including pride in heritage, strength in family, dedication to education and personal achievement." The program understated the ability of this author to mesmerize with his enthusiasm and with his sometimes raw use of language. A key point reiterated throughout his presentation was the benefit of being multilingual, citing that "English-only causes isolation," whereas speaking two languages causes activity in different parts of the brain. Villasenor insisted that "we don't have political problems, we don't have religious problems, we have language problems" when differences in languages cause misunderstandings or insults between users of those languages. He provided the example of the word "I", explaining that some languages do not capitalize the word because the speakers of that language do not recognize the individual as important, preferring to emphasize the good of the community and not the self.

Mr. Villasenor's stance on the importance of education came through loud and clear when he spoke on the relationship between society and an educated person. He stated, "If you don't get educated, society kicks your ass. If you get educated, you get to kick society's ass." His language did not appeal to all in the audience; however, his message brought various waves of applause. He related his personal experiences with his own two sons, who were hugely

impacted by their education, one negatively and the other positively. In spite of having a higher than average IQ, one son wound up hating school and doing poorly due to not being identified as dyslexic and due to lack of individualized instruction from caring educators. The second son, now a doctor, was also dyslexic and had a normal IQ. However, he exceeded expectations due to his participation in the AVID program as a high school student. AVID teachers and tutors taught him organization and other necessary study skills which helped him to be successful in college. Mr. Villasenor expressed how important the attitudes of the teachers are to the success of a student. “Kids don’t care how much you know; they care how much you care,” he stressed to the audience of educators.

As he gave a short synopsis of his life growing up in a well-to-do family he explained his fear of being in the classroom and blaming his mother for leaving him in such a hostile environment. He hated school because he was ridiculed by teachers and students due to his lack of English-speaking skills. However, he also related how one substitute for his regular teacher taught him to write with passion without worrying about spelling and grammar until after the story was written. The idea was to bring out the passion and creativity, which was more important and difficult to do than the revision process. That teacher made such an impact that he refers to him often in his presentations. Mr. Villasenor, who is also a well-known and sought-after speaker, added that the lessons he learned helped him become an advocate for the appropriate education of all students, especially Latinos like himself, who many times are sorted out into the non-college track because of their language or ethnicity, not their potential or intelligence.

He also praised the significance of women as intelligent and persistent optimists, able to solve problems creatively, yet many times satisfied with standing on the sidelines. He

encouraged the audience to be more cognizant of a woman's intelligence and to recognize them for their persistence in getting as far as they have in spite of the many obstacles placed before them. He ended his speech by demonstrating the correct way to hug and insisting on everyone hugging the person next to them as a finale to his presentation. A standing ovation ensued as he waved good-bye.

Latino Success: A K-16 System of Advocacy

Led by Barbara Musetti, this session reiterated the need for effective and equitable education for Latino students. However, she also educated the audience on some effective programs, practices, and policies and AVID's contribution to creating access to a rigorous curriculum for Latinos. She ended her presentation by walking participants through the components of a plan to implement a districtwide model of AVID.

Need for Effective and Adequate Education

Recognizing the need for specialized skills in problem-solving and group dynamics, Ms. Musetti defined the needs to be successful in a global economy. Unfortunately, the Latino population, which happens to be the youngest and fastest growing population, remains the least educated and underperforming group of students in public schools. Because lack of education leads to lack of employment opportunity, an income gap is also created between the educated and uneducated adults, leading to a heavier burden on our entire American society. Among the skills she cited will be needed by workers of the future are:

- being multilingual,
- being highly literate,
- being flexible and knowing how to learn,
- being creative problem solvers,

- being mobile,
- being lifelong learners, and
- being technologically proficient.

Programs, Practices, and Policies

However, she added that the good news is that Latinos learn in ways that are conducive to good work habits. Ms. Musetti named four qualities: collaboration, real-life application, bilingualism, and valuing cultural diversity, as strategies that help Latinos to be successful in the academic environment and help them stay on the path to college readiness, which is AVID's goal. She added that the entire multidisciplinary team must work together and a schoolwide effort must be undertaken to ensure all students a rigorous curriculum. By working together the entire school community can provide the support needed for Latinos and other underserved students become successful in the classroom. She emphasized that we cannot continue to blame parents or use the economic status of the family to allow low expectations for this student group. In addition, educators must educate themselves about the fallacies surrounding the miseducation of Latino students, such as "English is English is English, whether it is written, spoken, conversational or academic". By not being cognizant of research-based findings, educators will add to the downward spiral in achievement for Latinos caused by the educators' misinformation and misconceptions.

A topic of interest in Ms. Musetti's presentation centered on the underachievement and low graduation rates of female Hispanics (Latinas). Various reasons surfaced which contribute to the dismal four-year graduation rates. Poverty related issues, lack of English proficiency, instability due to immigration status, school safety concerns, and little parental involvement all played a role in this problem. Adding the highest pregnancy rates of any subgroup and the

propensity to sacrifice an education to care for family members further exacerbates the problem. She cited nine MALDEF's recommendations for improving Latinas education statistics, all addressing the obstacles previously mentioned. Some examples are: 1) more early childhood education and child care, 2) providing role models and goal-setting, and 3) requiring better data collection and school accountability.

The AVID program provides the environment for students to be successful and maximizes their potential. One activity presented by Ms. Musetti was the use of Middle School Mother-Daughter groups to encourage parental involvement and emphasize the role of the female in the family, leading to increased self-esteem of the students. The use of specially trained educators and planned experiential activities provide the environment for understanding and development of higher order thinking skills as students bond with other members of the school community. Photos of students participating in a field trip to various sites during a nineteen day college campus program provided another strategy to entice students by providing hands-on, real-life applications to their learning. The students learned how water impacts various aspects of their lives by visiting a water treatment plant, a lake, and a trout hatchery, all while attending class and labs for college credit. How could they not strive to return to college with an experience like that!

A Districtwide Initiative

Once a district decides to implement a system-wide AVID program to ensure college readiness for all students, Ms. Musetti suggested various steps to follow. At the elementary school level children can be taught the expectations of the school by learning to set goals and to have pride for themselves and the school. In addition, educators must explain why the students must learn the environment and structure of the school. Students must also learn to make

predictions about themselves in the future in tandem with their goals. Finally, she insisted that elementary schools be exposed to museums and college campuses to arouse their curiosity and help them make connections to what they are studying.

Middle schools should provide activities to keep the family involved in the students' lives at school and support the parents in voicing their concerns or suggestions. Educators at this level should encourage students to take the time to enjoy middle school and not be in a rush to grow up, while reminding them that they have choices, and should continue mapping their plans for the future success in school. All these activities will help the students have a sense of belonging at the school because their level of alienation and discomfort in the school setting is reduced, leaving them open to concentrating on learning.

High schools should reinforce to students that they still have choices and they can still be kids. However, educators at this level of education must also emphasize the brainstorming of possibilities so students can make intelligent choices as they increase their level of confidence in the academic environment. Because students are so close to entering college life at this stage, teachers must also provide additional support to reduce or eliminate the fear of leaving the security and familiarity of the high school classroom. By following a rigorous curriculum, all students will make a smooth transition to the college setting. Having internalized the structure and strategies the AVID provides, a student cannot help but be successful in post-secondary education.

Districts deciding to follow this path must make the commitment through their school boards to support the implementation of all components of the program. That commitment includes providing a budget for training, materials, and activities to ensure quality application of all components of AVID. She encouraged districts to push the states and congress to facilitate the

use of research-based programs like AVID by legislating funding opportunities to ensure the success of Latinos and all student groups with special needs.

Advocacy for Parental Involvement

The session titled, *Conocimiento: School-Based Parent Leadership Teams*, presented six components to successfully developing a school-based leadership team. Led by Scott Filippini, the Parent Leadership Program Coordinator of the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition of Denver, Colorado, the principles centered on much of Paolo Freire's teachings and understandings of educating the poor and helping them find a voice in order to participate in their own education and in their own government. He cited research indicating the importance of parental involvement for the academic success of students, including Henderson and Mapp (2002) who found that "The more parents can be advocates for their children and support their progress, the better their children do, and the longer they stay in school." Because Hispanic students currently experience such low percentages of success in all core academic areas, the presenter emphasized the need to develop parent leadership teams at the campus and district level. Mr. Filippini engaged the participants in various activities to elaborate on the six principles which his agency promoted as the foundation for the process of engaging parents in the schools:

- 1) Bond with your Community.
- 2) Create Dialogue.
- 3) Share Knowledge.
- 4) Promote Self-Awareness.
- 5) Transform behaviors.

Bonding with the community acknowledges and values the diversity of the participants'

Background and experiences as it creates unity among the membership. Creating dialogue encourages participation and assists in developing common ground for the group. During the sharing of knowledge educators and parents learn essential information about the schools, such as their state's accountability system and its requirement for the success of all students. In addition, during implementation of this component the expectation for respect for all group members is established. The special skills or expertise of all members of the group, including parents, are discussed in the phase of promoting awareness as constituents are empowered through shared leadership roles and through recognition of their strengths. To ensure proper and effective communication skills, the transform behaviors principle is integral. Traditional behaviors must be transformed into productive ones. Parents and educators are provided workshops detailing how to approach each other and how to advocate for the students. The desired result of this component is to transform behaviors conducive to positive and productive meetings between educators and parents. Praxis, the final component in developing parent leadership teams is to combine all these principles and put them into practice by developing a school parental involvement plan to increase student achievement. Mr. Filippini finalized his presentation by reminding the audience that empowerment of the parents is crucial to ensure involvement and by using these six principles presented, schools can be successful at that endeavor.

Staying the Course: Strategies for Preparing

First-Generation College Attendees

Advocacy for educational success does not end in high school; it continues into post-secondary education. At this level, enrollment is not as large a problem as are retention and completion. Hispanics have some of the lowest completion rates of all ethnic groups. Dr.

Edward Mainzer, experienced in working with schools and college students, identified various obstacles faced by students who are preparing to be first-generation college attendees. He discussed strategies that could be used by school counselors to prepare these students and their families. His goal was to raise consciousness about Hispanic first-generation students in particular.

Obstacles Faced by Future First Generation College Students

The demographics of first generation college students are all factors that negatively impact academic success. This group of students tends to be older, from lower income households, female, of African-American or Hispanic ethnicity, and married. Adding further complications to a sector of Hispanic students is their undocumented status in the United States. Many can legally attend college, but are ineligible for financial aid due to their lack of legal residence.

Being older and being married indicate a high probability of economic responsibilities, such as work, child care, or caring for elderly parents. These situations make the student less likely to become involved in campus activities or to develop relationships with their professors and other students, which can become support structures when needed to improve grades. The result is a higher risk of failing a course and accumulating credits from one semester to the other. A sense of belonging will not develop for the campus environment and dropping out becomes an easier path to follow.

Because Hispanic and African-American parents tend to be less educated, they also tend to be less involved with school and are less familiar with the intricacies of choosing a college specific to their student's professional goals. Although careers in math and science may be more promising financially, these parents may not recognize the importance of completing a rigorous

curriculum with more math and science courses and more extra-curricular activities in preparation for acceptance and success at a four year university. The parents may also not recognize the need to nurture human relationships at school in order to increase the student's sense of belonging and to provide emotional and academic support. Dr. Mainzer referred to this as "financial literacy". The end product (degree) is more valuable than the temporary income produced by employment while attending college.

Being undocumented creates additional problems for first generation college attendees. Besides not being eligible for financial aid, these students may not enroll in programs that require special clearance, such as government agencies, hospital settings, and public schools. Neither the parents nor the students may be aware of these restrictions. Finally, additional stress may come from constantly being in fear of deportation of themselves or their family members. Although all these obstacles confront this class of students, there are strategies for educators to encourage their enrollment, retention, and completion of college.

Strategies to Increase the Level of Student Success in College

What can educators and counselors in high school do to increase the knowledge base of students before enrolling in a particular college? First, schools must hire enough counselors to monitor all students' schedules to ensure that college application requirements are met. In addition, Dr. Mainzer suggests that students be taught the structure of the higher education system, acceptance criteria, support systems for college success, and the financial aid application process. Counselors are encouraged to develop a plan for yearly activities which will increase awareness of these topics, providing the foundation for students to make more informed decisions about the college of their choice. Hispanic families, especially, must be helped to understand the need to sacrifice full time employment during school in order to graduate sooner

and enjoy a more substantial income resulting from higher education sooner. Finally, the presenter emphasized that counselors must be honest with undocumented students, so they find out their limitations, if any, before they spend time on the application process. He stated that it is unfair to allow these students to waste valuable time preparing for a program in which they will not be eligible for employment or they cannot afford financially. Implementing all these suggestions will ensure that Latinos will overcome the hurdles placed upon them by the circumstances of their birth.

Making Meaning of Motivation: Connecting Culture and Academic Success

Dr. Tara Dowd, an advocate for Latino student success, provided a literature review of readings elaborating on findings which provided the basis for her presentation. By connecting the experiences of a student's culture and his social groups, Dr. Dowd explained, motivational activities may be found to increase that student's academic success. The audience listened to an explanation of the theories of self-determination, self-efficacy, mindset, flow, and stereotype threat to better understand the reasoning for the motivational activities suggested.

Activities that support autonomy promote an environment that increases intrinsic motivation, which the Theory of Self-Determination contends is a naturally occurring human characteristic. To provide such an environment, educators must engage in less directive instruction and increase student-centered activities, student-generated discussions, background and culturally relevant lessons, and inquiry-based opportunities. The premise is that the student's confidence in being successful at a given task will increase and so will his path to self-directed learning.

The Self-Efficacy Theory states that motivation is essential and positively correlated to self-confidence. Activities which increase the opportunities for success will increase a student's history with success, leading to increased motivation, whereas a history of failure will decrease motivation and cause a student to quit trying to master a task. Observing success by others like themselves will also create a surge in confidence level, indicating the need for educators to include academically successful peers with all students. A third factor influencing a student's desire to attempt a task is other's perception of their abilities. Teachers can respond with strategies that promote the positive identity of all students' cultures. Finally, having a history of success also promotes resiliency in students, which positively impacts self-efficacy. As educators prepare their lesson plans, it behooves them to consider the self-efficacy theory to increase and maintain a high level of motivation.

A person's mindset is another determinant of motivation to attempt a task, as it will determine the amount of effort he/she may put into an activity or project. A student who exhibits a "fixed" mindset may believe that success or failure is pre-determined and nothing he or she does will change that, diminishing the motivation to try. A student who exhibits a "growth" mindset believes that success results from effort and the more effort that is expended, the likelier their chance for success. The presenter suggests that educators teach students about the growth mindset so they can recognize that the only limits on their abilities are those imposed by their mindset.

When a student is so engaged in a lesson that he ignores his surroundings, he has reached a state of "flow" translating to increased motivation. In response to this finding, teachers are encouraged to engage students in extracurricular activities which will increase the opportunities for students to experience this state of flow. Lessons which increase flow include tasks with

clear goals, which students can complete, and which students can concentrate on. Immediate feedback should be provided and students should have some level of control over their actions. Finally, projects should create deep concentration in order to remove the students' mind from his environment. The expectation is a motivated and stronger student for the experience.

A final topic covered by Dr. Down was the stereotype threat, which asserts that a student will perform based on stereotypical predictions. To negate this expectation, classroom settings should include more cooperative learning because it encourages acceptance of all members' backgrounds and cultures as all students engage in inclusive social interaction with their peers. All the theories mentioned were instrumental in providing the conditions necessary for optimal motivation to undertake and be successful in academic tasks. By creating photo essays, writing about their role models, and creating a reflection journal with personal information, students can provide fodder for teachers' lesson plans and for their own success in the classroom.

Promoting Minority Involvement in Science,
Technology, Engineering, and Math

The advocacy theme recurred in Dr. Dixon's presentation of her district's plan to increase participation in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Reminding educators to explore their own biases and values before working with students of diverse backgrounds, Dr. Dixon began her presentation by reviewing statistical data showing the low achievement levels of minority groups in the STEM fields, even though those are the areas of growth and greatest financial reward in our global economy. The Grand Prairie School District decided to implement a program to combat the statistics in their community. Using culturally responsive leadership, pedagogy, and practices, the district initiated a systemwide effort to

engage the community, the parents, and the students in increasing the participation of all students in the STEM targeted areas of study.

The first step in the process was the staff development of educators on the present state of minority participation in the STEM courses and strategies to assist minority students succeed in the classroom. Principals were held responsible for knowing the culture and characteristics of their community in order to better serve the students. Teachers received workshops to be more culturally responsive because teachers play a crucial role in creating an environment conducive to student success. Not only must they be knowledgeable in their area, their attitudes can make or break children's aspirations. The importance of teachers' expectations for student learning and their sense of responsibility for student success is noted by Rumberger and Palardy (2005). By knowing their students, their backgrounds, and how their experiences affect their construction of knowledge, these educators ensured they could incorporate this knowledge into their lessons to validate the students' contributions and build on their previous knowledge. Finally, culturally responsive schooling practices, such as school policies and practices, school-community-parent relationships, extracurricular activities, student-teacher interaction, and school values placed in its traditions, celebrations, and symbols, became the norm.

Next, speakers were invited from various organizations, from the federal government to local businesses to motivate students to enter the STEM fields of study. Students and parents responded well to the presentations. Parental involvement in planned workshops was increased by using a 3 X 3 strategy, which consisted of using three ways to communicate the invitations, using three colors of stationary, and providing three incentives for participation. Taken together, the commitment from the district exemplified a common and persistent goal for all stakeholders.

A third step of the plan was to set up conferences for students participation in activities that introduced them to the STEM disciplines in a fun way. The entire community also participated in various celebrations of ethnic minority contributions to education and the STEM fields. As celebrations were occurring student interest peaked. College preparation nights were incorporated into the activities to further assist students in all areas of application and enrollment to colleges. Field trips to college campuses were added to finalize the STEM initiative and to acquaint students with campus life and expectations.

A natural progression into using the AVID program as a springboard to implement the culturally responsive strategies in the STEM initiatives ensued. The AVID program already advocates rigor, relevance, and relationships as a framework for producing college-ready students. By incorporating publicity for their events and celebrations for students, educators, and the community, the Grand Prairies School District made quick progress in educating the public about STEM and in signing up participants for all events. The end result was increased involvement of females and minorities in the various activities offered by the administrators of the district STEM plan, increased parental involvement, improved leadership development, and perhaps the greatest accomplishment---- improved instruction to meet the needs of underserved students. Dr. Dixon invited everyone to visit and to feel free to direct any questions to her office in the Grand Prairie School District.

Students Advocating for AVID and AVID Teachers

The student panel session of the JUNTOS Conference created an opportunity to connect a human face to AVID success. Ediberto D., a University of Texas at Austin student and former AVID participant, was the first student to testify to the effectiveness of the strategies used in

AVID. With a comical tone of voice, he used Spanglish to communicate to the audience. “I consider myself Latino, a Mexican,” he announced, reinforcing his pride in his culture and his family. “However, I will never say I failed because I am Mexican. I feel a responsibility as a Latino to stand out in a positive way, not use it as an excuse to fail.” He related his strong desire to pursue the American dream, yet not really knowing what path to take to reach that dream. By participating in AVID he learned about college expectations and how to organize and structure his learning to ensure success. “Those binders really helped me at UT. Everything I learned in AVID helped me, especially my teachers,” he said as the audience applauded his speech.

Yolanda V., another former AVID student, now enrolled at Our Lady of the Lake University, also used humor to communicate her support for AVID practices which were making her successful in the college classroom. “Four years of strategies, binders, planners, and Cornell notes—I can’t do anything else. This is all I know,” she stated, laughing as the audience laughed with her. She reminded administrators of the importance of choosing the right teachers to implement the program because implementation of the program was the key to helping minority students be successful in high school and be college ready. “The teachers are the most important part of AVID,” she explained, “And I had great ones.”

Alejandro C. a third college student who had participated in AVID while in high school took the stand next. He reminisced about his friend’s attitudes toward him when he told them he was joining AV ID because he wanted to go to college. “They looked at me weird because they didn’t see the need to get ready for college. And my classes kept getting smaller and smaller,” he added, inferring that less students were taking the college track classes. In spite of the peer pressure to take less rigorous courses, Alejandro implemented his knowledge of study guides, Cornell notes, and the rest his AVID toolkit to succeed in his classroom. When asked what

message his teacher had given him that helped him most in college, he stated that every time he complained about how hard everything was, his teacher would say, “Yes it’s going to be difficult, but it’s not impossible.” After that last statement he thanked his high school teacher for caring about him and his success.

The remaining panel of students responded to various questions from the moderator and audience. When asked what part of AVID had helped the most in being successful in class, all students named their organizer and their Cornell notes. The use of binders and schedulers came in second in order of usefulness. Even the elementary students voiced their appreciation for learning note-taking skills because their comprehension of higher-level books was so good. When asked, “Was it all worth it?” the following responses surfaced:

“Definitely, it makes the work of reading hard books easier.” (Alejandro)

“I am ahead of the others because of AVID.” (Francisca)

“It helps me get ready for junior high. If you want to be a doctor, you can succeed instead of being left out.” (Mariah)

“AVID targets multiple kinds of students. That orientation really helps.” (Eddie)

“They taught me how to get to an answer, not just gave me an answer.” (Alejandro)

Finally, when asked about special messages they remembered from their teachers, one student commented, “Mr. Martinez, he always showed us that he cared. He would tell us, ‘Don’t be satisfied unless it’s your best.’” The power of the student-teacher relationship to motivate the students to succeed was loud and clear. These students had no qualms about advocating for AVID or their teachers.

Conclusion

Poster Sessions

Lights and colorful displays drew the attention of attendees to the poster sessions of the conference. Advocating for effective instructional strategies to better educate Hispanic students from elementary school to the college classroom, the presenters provided specific practices conducive to increased academic achievement of this underserved population. Strategies to reach out to the community and to parents for increased student support and opportunities also appeared in the poster sessions. Each presenter provided one piece of the puzzle to increase the performance of Hispanic students. True to the JUNTOS and advocacy theme, the posters painted a picture of what is possible when educators join together, voice their concerns, and then develop a plan to eradicate an achievement gap between minority students and their White counterparts. AVID is now part of that plan from the beginning of grade school to the beginning of college. Watch out, achievement gap, here we come!!

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