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Kaela Krueger, center, leads a math review with fellow AVID students. Krueger and her mother, Kay Krueger, joined Riggs and several students in a visit to the USD 480 school board meeting last week. The program, Kay Krueger said, "kept my daughter on the straight and narrow and helped her tremendously in working harder." Other students who addressed the board were Dalia Camacho, Jaime Minjarez, Puja Bhakta, Andres Escalantes and Angles Ruiz. Courtesy photo

AVID program helps mid-level students chart a course to college

By RACHEL coleman • Leader & Times Four years ago, Maria Avelino figured she'd finish high school the easy way — by quitting. "I was in the gang road," she said. "I was hanging around with people who don't care, who say just be tough, who think school isn't important. I didn't really think I would make it. I thought I would drop out."

Saturday, the Liberal High School senior graduates with her class. And while the diploma she's earned is the first anyone in her immediate family has received, it won't be the only one she plans to complete. In August, Avelino heads to Emporia State University to start work on a bachelor's degree.

The outcome is exactly what Avelino's teacher Luz Riggs envisioned when she agreed to add the AVID program to her duties as Spanish language instructor at LHS.

"When the principal asked me five years ago to consider the program, my first response was to think and pray about it," Riggs recalled. Along with a team from LHS, Riggs visited the only AVID school in Kansas, Wichita North High School, to see what the college-prep program involved. Before the day's demonstration ended, Riggs said, "we called back to Liberal to say, 'Let's do it! We're all in, we want to be a part of it.'"

This month marks the graduation of the first AVID cohort — students who participated in at least three years of the program, named for its aim of Advancement Via Individual Determination. In plain language, that means a strategy to motivate "middle" students — those who earn passing but not dazzling grades — to reach a little higher. The goal is to equip them to get themselves to college, and to navigate college successfully.

In Riggs' AVID classroom, all 20 seniors are college-bound. Half will attend Seward County Community College, and half are headed to state universities.

"I'm expecting all 20 to graduate with a bachelor's degree in their lifetime," said USD 480 AVID director Rita Williams.

Considering that only 36 percent of college students in the United States complete four-year degrees, Williams' expectations might seem a bit optimistic. But not if you look at AVID's track record. The 2010 college graduation rate for AVID students nationwide was 91 percent.

While it's true that not every student can reasonably aspire to attend college, many who could, don't, Williams said.

"There are students with potential who just don't have the support or the experience to realize what's possible," she said. "Every home is different, and in many cases parents do not understand their children can go to college, how it works, what's involved. So the kids don't even consider it. They don't believe they can do it."

The AVID teachers, though, look through the lens of potential. Through daily doses of instruction in critical thinking, study skills, time management, common sense and determination, Riggs and four other LHS instructors mentor students who've applied for the program.

"Those skills can be learned," said Williams. "Students just need support."

The support is not a one-class, one-year matter. AVID teachers commit hours of extra time to "their" kids, with afterschool study sessions, one-on-one planning sessions and frequent communication with parents. They develop long-term relationships with their students as the students progress through high school; classes and instructors stay together from freshman year to graduation.

"I tell my students, 'I'm going to be here to help you, give you tools and strategies, encourage

you,” said Riggs.

In some cases, it takes at least a year for the “Individual Determination” effect to take hold. Andres Escalante, an LHS junior, was not an AVID believer his freshman year.

“I called it the nerd class,” he said with a laugh. “I didn’t like it, because the people I hung out with thought it was stupid to work hard at school.”

Yet his daily sessions with AVID instructor Melesa Westerman began to change his attitude, as did the interaction with classmates who’d also chosen to focus on academic excellence.

“Now, I actually talk to them,” he said. “We’re all nerds.”

Escalante’s turning point was when “I passed Mr. George’s Algebra II class,” he said, “With an A. This year, I’m taking trigonometry, and I have a 90 percent.”

The young man who used to “talk smack” every time he went to the gas station, toying with gang conflicts between South Siders and Folks, planned to drop out once he turned 16. He daydreamed of being a doctor or maybe a math teacher, but “I didn’t really think I could do it. Now, I want to be an engineer, and I think I can. I know I can,” he said.

By the time he arrives at his destination — Kansas State University — Escalante will have completed year four of AVID training. The seniors in the program progress from fundamental scholarship skills that revolve around careful reading, note-taking and critical thought, to college-readiness material: how to visit and select a college, set up a manageable class schedule, communicate with professors, balance work and study and recreation, handle financial aid and even manage a difficult roommate.

“In some ways, you almost become like a second mom,” Riggs said. “Then, little by little, you remove that blanket and they see how to advocate for themselves, make decisions, show determination.”

“The teachers push you to do your best,” Avelino said, “And it makes you want to stay on the right path. I saw how the gangs were, how they’re not always going to be there for you, and how you have to say something to make a change. I wanted to support my mom, do something so she could be proud of me. I didn’t want to go to the gangs like my big brothers did, even though everyone expected I would. I wanted to prove them wrong. And I did.”

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