

*This letter looks at the retention of African American males in AVID and AP® in five domains. It was written by Patrick Briggs (AVID Texas Assistant State Director) to an African American male administrator in response to a question about recruiting and retaining African American male students in Honors and AP courses.*

## **WHAT DO WE CELEBRATE?**

As a former administrator, when people ask me about retaining African American males in AVID and AP® I ask them, “What do you celebrate at your school?” I recently conducted a staff development at a high school in Texas. During a break in the training, I stepped outside and watched the basketball team practicing while school was out during Thanksgiving week. I did not see a basketball player who was not black. This school was about 30% Hispanic, 30% white, and 30% African American. I noticed that the basketball team was 100% black. I asked about the percentage of African American males in their AP program and I received the answer that I expected. Once a week, this school pulls every student out of class to attend a pep rally for the sports teams. The band plays, the cheerleaders cheer, the dance team dances, and everyone yells and screams and “celebrates” the sports teams. Having a conversation with the Spanish teacher, I asked him if he would love to have his Spanish students show up on a non-school day eager to practice Spanish with him and of course he agreed he would! If schools treated academics the same way they treated sports, academics would see the same outcomes. I’m waiting for the day when the entire school is pulled out of class once a week to have a pep rally for those who are on the honor roll or in AP classes.

I have been just as guilty. I celebrated my sports teams (OK, it’s worse in Texas) weekly, but I had an honor roll breakfast once a semester (twice a year)! Only those on the honor roll could attend. Half the kids were embarrassed to be pulled out of class because they were going to the “nerd” celebration and only other “nerds” were invited. When academics are celebrated the way we celebrate sports, then it will be cool and exciting to participate in advanced academics. I recently read a book by Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu and he clearly stated why black boys want to be rappers, entertainers, and sports stars as that is what our culture celebrates. Dr. Kunjufu states that T.V. is the second biggest influence (after peers) to African American males. The T.V. channels that boys watch (like MTV, ESPN and BET) all show and celebrate African Americans who can sing, dance, rap, act, or do something spectacular with a ball. In schools, we tend to celebrate the same things. What we celebrate says a lot about who we are and what is important to us. The media and society strongly encourage our African American boys to do similar things and when they do, they will be

adored, have a lot of money and women, and that they will be celebrated. I pray for the day when schools celebrate AP, honors classes, AVID, the honor roll, etc. as we celebrate sports.

## **I SEE COLOR!**

The next thing I would suggest is to look at the racial makeup of your most rigorous courses. I know from experience that if they are predominately white, I would not want to be there either. As a black boy, I was one of the few black boys in my high school's honors courses. I was ALWAYS called "white" or told that I was trying to be "white" by my black friends. If I did not have a strong support system at home, I would have dropped those classes in a heartbeat. Because my dad told me and reinforced it at home, I knew that I needed to be in those classes and I wanted to be in them. Please believe me that the peer pressure was more important to me. I wanted to fit in and to not be teased. AVID would have really helped me by helping the demographics of my honors courses look like the demographics of my school. As an administrator, I made sure that happened, and AVID was my vehicle. I started by making sure that every black boy had at least 3 other black boys in his advanced courses.

I would not allow a black boy to be the only one in an honors course. As AVID grew, it became normal to have blacks in honors courses and the kids stopped the "white" teasing because my most rigorous courses looked like my school. It was no longer, "That AP class is a white class." It became, "That AP class is mostly Hispanic and black because the school is mostly Hispanic and black and it is normal for Hispanics and blacks to be in there." Before AVID, the kids knew by looking at an honors class, that there were some classes that were 99% white. They assumed they were for white kids because they saw mostly whites in them and had no idea how to get in them (even if they wanted to). I had created a system of white privilege. My system was set up to reward kids with rigorous courses if their parents knew how to get them into those classes. I had also created a system to keep poor kids and kids of color out of those classes. This, of course, was not done consciously or intentionally. It was just the way my system worked. Everyone was used to it and nobody questioned it. It says a lot about who we were. As a person who sees color (I always tell administrators that they better see color) I knew I had a problem in my system. When your school is predominantly Hispanic and African American and your honors courses are predominantly white, the kids assume those classes are for whites and anyone in them is either white or wants to be. The system was saying that loud and clear. I was not comfortable sending that message nor was I

comfortable with the status quo. AVID was what I used to shake up my system. A big part of that was the parental component of AVID.

### **PARENTS ARE A MAJOR PART OF THE SOLUTION**

When looking at retaining black boys in AVID, the parents are crucial. My dad kept me in honors classes even when I did not want to be there. I really did want to be there, but I did not want to be teased. If my dad did not understand the hidden rules of school, I would never have been placed in those classes, or I would have purposely failed to get out. I know now that staying in my honors courses was worth it, but as a 14 year old, I would have preferred to be in classes that were more diverse and not have had to endure the teasing. I found that when I educated parents of color about AVID and what AVID was going to do for their kids, they were my biggest supporters. My parents talked to their kids about AVID and college and insisted that they stay in AVID and do well. Before AVID, parents knew that their kids were smart, but were fine with the As, Bs, and Cs in regular classes. Their kids were passing and no one from the school was calling them on their jobs. I let the parents know that their kids were brilliant and needed to be in more rigorous courses. Once I educated them on the benefits of AVID and AP courses and explained how AVID was going to help with study skills, organization, writing, mandatory tutoring, GPA, college applications, scholarships, etc., they became like my dad and became very educated about school and the benefits of the honors program. Once I had them hooked in the school as AVID parents, they started to change the demographics of my parent volunteer program. Before AVID, the demographics of my parents in my volunteer program did not mirror the demographics of my students.

### **GIVING AVID STUDENTS A VOICE AND THE TOOLS FOR SUCCESS**

Having ongoing class meetings with the AVID kids and the special things they face as AVID kids also helped to retain them. We would discuss what to do when they are teased for being “white” or a “nerd.” They learned to anticipate this and had the tools to deal with it. I found when my students of color were equipped with the tools to combat peer pressure, they felt much better about defending themselves and about staying in AVID and honors classes. They knew the benefits of AVID and AP and wanted to be there, but the peer pressure was real. We do the same thing with sexual education. We teach the kids about the truth, the myths, the benefits of abstinence, and how to deal with peer pressure. This allows kids to understand and anticipate the peer pressure, thus giving them the tools to make informed decisions and choices. These same rules can be applied to AVID students. When AVID students are given the tools in order to anticipate and understand what their peers may say, they are better prepared to deal with it.

## **THE ADMINISTRATOR SETS THE TONE**

Administrative support is also critical to the retention of black boys in AVID and AP courses. The administrative support comes in his or her expectations of the staff. When my teachers knew that poor kids and kids of color in AVID and AP were very important to me, then it became very important to them. AVID methodologies became a part of my walk-throughs and a part of their teacher evaluations. I modeled AVID methodologies in my staff meetings and let it be known in no uncertain terms that I expected to see them in the classroom. AVID methodologies are good for all kids. They are also research-based and proven effective. We all wanted the best for our kids. I told my staff that our previous AP program sent a strong message to kids that those were elite classes and only reserved for the best and brightest, and all others need not apply. Once it was pointed out to them that we had a flaw in our system, they could not help but see it and wanted to do something about it. It is very hard to argue with your own data. My own data said that I had inequities in my system at best and a racist system at worst. They knew that I expected for non-traditional AP students to be in AP classes and that it was my expectation that they support, nurture, encourage, and retain non-“cookie-cutter” kids in AP classes. The administrator supports and retains black boys in AVID and AP by leading, having the vision and clearly articulating that vision to the teachers.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

Everybody wants to be normal and cool. Is it normal and cool for black boys to be in your most rigorous courses? In 1999, it was not cool or normal for a black boy to be in AP at my school. Through analyzing what I celebrated, seeing in color, seeking out and educating parents, giving students a voice and the tools to use that voice, and setting the tone, it is now normal and cool to be anybody in AP, honors, and rigorous courses. Frederick Douglass said that without struggle there is no progress. The status quo and the norms set up by the system are institutionalized. The progress is worth the struggle and it's the right thing to do for kids.

Please forgive me for going on and on. I am very passionate about this subject and I could continue indefinitely. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions, comments or concerns.

Sincerely,

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