

Posted on Mon, Jan. 25, 2010

Modesto students take different path to graduation

By Michelle Hatfield
mhatfield@modbee.com

In a blue cap and gown, teenager José Mariscal confidently grabbed the bell and rang it loudly in front of about 20 classmates.

Mariscal's parents looked on, proud that their son refused the path of least resistance -- dropping out of school. After falling behind in credits at Modesto High School, Mariscal decided to try AdvancePath Academy, an alternative education program housed at Beyer High School. Students catch up on course work, studying at their own pace and concentrating on two subjects at a time. Most work is done on a computer.

"I got sidetracked, distracted," said Mariscal, 19. He was more successful at AdvancePath, he said, because it allowed him to focus and set his own pace instead of getting overwhelmed with multitasking in a classroom where his teachers talk while students read and take notes.

At the bell ringing, Mariscal's teachers congratulated him on graduating. They told other students that he entered the academy a year ago, behind by 110 credits -- nearly two years' worth of classes.

He plans to enroll at Modesto Junior College and study law enforcement.

"I graduated. I feel important. ... It's given me confidence. It's made me realize I can go further," Mariscal said.

AdvancePath held a midyear graduation ceremony for 33 students Friday, in addition to the bell ringing.

AdvancePath is for students who aren't succeeding at regular high schools but don't have the more severe attendance and discipline problems of students at Elliott Continuation High School. AdvancePath students are screened and only those who really want a high school diploma are accepted, said lead teacher Ed Jackson.

"The No. 1 benefit is (students) get a Beyer diploma and can graduate with their class," Jackson said. "The biggest advantage is they get to work in this kind of professional-type setting. They're responsible for their own success from the minute they walk into class. I see us (teachers) as more mentors and facilitators. The student's driving the bus, not the teacher."

Modesto City Schools officials joined with AdvancePath Academies Inc. a year and a half ago. Teachers will present an update to the district's board of education next month.



At center, Jose Mariscal, 19, is hugged by his mom, Leticia Tovar as his dad, Juan Alonzo watches at his bell ringing ceremony in class at AdvancePath Academy, January 21, 2010 at Beyer High School.

Almost 150 students are enrolled, most of them juniors and seniors. They take classes in four-hour chunks in the morning, afternoon or evening. When it comes to behavior issues, students tend to shape up while at AdvancePath. A sample of 10 students showed they logged 254 behavior referrals from their regular high schools, but none since transferring to AdvancePath.

"There's a lot of learning support," Jackson said. "We offer small-group instruction, remedial help (on the High School Exit Exam, for example), life skills and goal setting. ... It's not one-size-fits-all education. That no longer serves the needs of our population."

Not the same, but 'rigorous'



The AdvancePath Academy at Beyer High is open, with 120 students catching-up in the school's new lab. These are kids that lack the credits to graduate and this program aims to help them get their diplomas. Students work with computers at individual work stations.

Detractors argue against the cost of AdvancePath and the safety issues of placing the at-risk students at a regular high school. They say students do less work than those at comprehensive high schools.

"It's not the same, but it's very rigorous," said Jackson, noting a number of teachers who have looked at AdvancePath's curriculum and commented on its difficulty.

Recent graduate Marlene Rodriguez agreed, especially when it comes to math.

"With math, I get extra help. Some parts are hard, some parts are easy," she said. Rodriguez nearly dropped out of Davis High School because of low attendance and difficulty learning English. Then she heard about AdvancePath.

"My mom cleans houses. I don't want to be like that. My dad's a plumber. He works all day for little pay," said the 18-year-old. "(Graduating) feels awesome because you're done with school, and now you got to go to college and focus on what you want to be in life."

Rodriguez plans to move to the Bay Area and attend a four-year university to study nursing.

Each graduate's bell ringing is a chance to celebrate their accomplishments and show others what is possible, Jackson said.

"They have the perseverance and resiliency. They just need to learn study habits and goal setting."

Bee staff writer Michelle Hatfield can be reached at mhatfield@modbee.com or 578-2339. Read Hatfield's education blog at thehive.modbee.com/ExtraCredit.