

## **Local program bridges the gap between high school and college**

By Lydia Spann

La Vega High School senior Amariye Baunson will be the first in his family to attend college. He aspires to go into sports management, but he's keeping his options open.

Baunson, 18, has already been accepted to three colleges. As a first-generation college student, he wonders what life might look like when he gets there.

That's where Project Link comes in.

Project Link is a program that helps Waco-area high school students and their families in charting their journeys to post-secondary success. The program provides one-on-one college, career and financial advising. Project Link also offers continued support at local colleges.

"My biggest fear is not finishing once I get to college," Baunson said. "I've seen it happen to other people."

LaTishia Watson, the liaison for Project Link at La Vega High School, works with Baunson and 250 other students.

"It's my job to push them and answer their questions," Watson said. "I try to get them to believe that they can do it as much as I believe that they can."

Students selected for participation in the program are those whose grade point averages rank in the middle 60 percent of each grade level.

"They are the ones who would receive less college and career counseling," Natalie James, Project Link Coordinator, said.

One way that Project Link is providing support to first-generation college students is by getting parents involved. Parent Engagement Night, beginning this spring, will be an opportunity for parents to learn about the options available to their children and take part in their post-secondary journeys.

"We are trying to build a college-going culture within the Waco community," James said.

Project Link was created in the fall of 2015 out of a grant from the Rapoport Foundation to Prosper Waco, a collective impact initiative. One of Prosper Waco's goals is to increase the percentage of economically disadvantaged students who complete a workforce certificate or college degree.

Baunson said that being involved with Project Link has helped him have the confidence he needed to apply to colleges and believe he could pursue his goals in sports management.