Admission Possible aims to place more low-income kids on the path to a college education

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At a White House event last June, President Barack Obama highlighted the work of St. Paul-based Admission Possible, an organization that helps teenagers from poor families get into college.

During his comments about innovative nonprofits, Obama acknowledged Admission Possible’s founder and chief executive officer, Jim McCorkell, while citing the group’s work with low-income families that resulted in almost all of its 2008 class getting into college.

“The vast majority of students stay in college and earn their degrees,” Obama said. “Admission Possible operates in just two states now, so imagine it were 10, or 20, or 50.”

Apparently, the president possesses mind-reading abilities.
That’s because the 42-year-old McCorkell had been thinking all along of taking his idea — now a reality in the Twin Cities and Milwaukee — to the national level: He announced this year his goal of adding 10 more cities to his roster by 2015.

In fact, McCorkell will be hiring someone to run the Twin Cities operation so he can lead the charge to expand Admission Possible into those 10 new states.

That’s quite a step for Admission Possible and McCorkell, who started the venture in 2000 in a spare-bedroom office and has grown it into a 100-employee operation with a $3.2 million budget—an accomplishment that the White House visit was a special acknowledgement of.

“It was one of those dream-come-true moments,” McCorkell says. “I was talking to my mom that night and she was watching CNN and she said ‘I saw you shake the president’s hand.’

“I thought about how powerful that is for a parent who didn’t go to college.”

The organization currently works in two dozen high schools in the metro area and four schools in Milwaukee, reaching 6,000 students annually—2,200 in college, 1,500 in high school, the rest in ninth- and 10th-grade workshops.

About 1,500 juniors and seniors are involved this year, and nearly all are people of color and from families earning less than $25,000 annually, according to McCorkell.

So what does Admission Possible do? Juniors and seniors attend after-school college preparatory classes taught by AmeriCorps’ and AmeriCorps’ VISTA volunteers.

Students receive instruction on filling out college and financial aid applications, applying for scholarships, writing personal essays, preparing for the ACTs, visiting campuses and transitioning to college.

The program becomes the equivalent of having a college coach, or providing for students the same commitment and attention middle-class parents give their college-bound teens.

“If you come from a middle-class family where your parents went to college, they do all this for you — they’ll encourage you to go college, they’ll nag when they need to nag you, they’ll guide you to college,” he says.

“That’s what we [at Admission Possible] do.”

The program offers other advantages for low-income learners — namely, a safe haven for ambitious youth who are often shunned by inner-city peers. “In urban schools there is a culture against achievement, that you’re ‘acting white’ if you’re trying to achieve,” he says.
“One of the things our program does is to give those kids a safe place to go after school and say ‘I want to make something out of my life, I want to be somebody.’ They’re in a room of people who aren’t going to laugh at them for that.”

The junior year curriculum includes weeks of preparation for the ACT tests, a key element to college tuition.

Despite good grades, low-income students often test poorly: Admission Possible participants average in the lowest 10th percentile in ACT scores when they enter the program.

Within a year, they improve their test scores by more than 20 percentage points — enough to pull them into the 35th percentile. “It’s moved enough that many four-year colleges will take a look at them,” McCorkell says.

The test scores have an important psychological impact on students as well, since for the first time in many of their lives they see that hard work can pay off, he says.

Better test scores also lead to successful applications: Admission Possible reports 98 percent of its students earn admission to college, and more than 90 percent attend. About 80 percent finish or are working toward a degree.

The majority of participants, McCorkell says, are women — by a 60-40 split. And the racial component is split among Asian-Americans, African-Americans and African immigrants in the Twin Cities, while African-Americans and Latinos dominate in Milwaukee.

One of Admission Possible’s Minneapolis students is Khadar Egal, 24, who just graduated from Augsburg College with a double major in business and accounting. The Somali immigrant grew up in Kenya and arrived in the Twin Cities at the age of 14 with no formal education.

At Roosevelt High School he began taking Admission Possible courses as an 18-year-old junior while struggling over the decision of whether to take a full-time job at Macy’s or to go to college.

The Admission Possible coach convinced him his life would be better with a college education. “I look at life like a wall you have to climb to get to the top of and when you’re at the top you’ll have a better chance of a good life,” Egal says. “Admission Possible gave me a push to get up that wall.”

He became the first member of his family to graduate college, a not uncommon achievement among Admission Possible participants. His sister was also in the program and is a student at the University of Minnesota. “She’s smarter than me,” he says.
Two keys to the program’s achievements are AmeriCorps’ volunteers and a three-year, $1.5 million grant from the McGuire Family Fund in 2006 that allowed McCorkell to double the number of students from 650 to more than 1,300.

The 70 AmeriCorps and VISTA volunteers who deliver the curriculum earn about $11,000 a year, a much less costly option for McCorkell than having a full- or even part-time staff.

McCorkell says he can afford to be “choosy” about the folks he chooses to work for Admission Possible, since only 70 people get hired while more than 350 apply.

**A personal acquaintance with hardship**

The red-haired McCorkell knows well the issues of poverty. The youngest in a family of five in Northfield, he saw how his mother and father struggled to make ends meet due in part to a lack of education.

His parents, George and LaVonne, dropped out of high school after falling in love and getting married, a decision that led to low-paying, manual jobs—but not to a dismissive attitude toward education.

In fact, all their children graduated from college. McCorkell credits his father with being an example of hard work and discipline; his mother, who recently passed away, “understood social justice and doing something good for the world.”

McCorkell stayed home for college — graduating in political science from Carleton College in 1990. He became one of the many students to draw inspiration from then-professor and future U.S. Sen. Paul Wellstone.

Following Carleton, McCorkell earned master’s degrees at the University of North Carolina and at Harvard. (Wellstone hand-wrote a recommendation of McCorkell to Harvard so the school would know it wasn’t a canned letter.) He worked on Wellstone’s campaign for the Senate in 1995 and 1996.

Upon turning 30, McCorkell seemed destined for a life as a college professor or a political campaign director. Uncomfortable with those paths, he tossed around the idea—at least in his mind—of a nonprofit to train poor kids to apprentice in the trades.

During a class one day at Harvard, his mind drifted off and he recalled teaching kids at Kaplan — the college preparatory company — and wondered whether a program to help low-income kids get into college would work.
McCorkell felt “peaceful” after arriving at the idea, and decided to pursue it with a vengeance. Figuring the Carleton mafia of graduates would help him raise money, he returned to Minnesota after graduating from Harvard and in 2000 started Admission Possible.

McCorkell arrived with his wife, Chris Greenhow, who holds a doctorate in education, and began raising money from wealthy individuals and foundations.

David B. Laird, Jr., retired president of the Minnesota Private College Council and a board member of Admission Possible, says McCorkell has the rare combination of being a visionary and having the ability to manage a fast-growing organization over the long haul. “It’s unusual to see that in an individual,” Laird says.

In addition to tackling the job of expanding Admission Possible nationally, McCorkell may be in for other serious change: His wife is up for a professorship in the East and he’s pondering what such a move might mean for them, especially considering they have a son, Jack, 5.

For now, McCorkell’s focused on selecting cities for expansion. “There aren’t too many people who can say they literally followed their dream and made it come true,” he says. “I’m the luckiest guy in the world.”

The McCorkell File

Name: Jim McCorkell

Age: 42 Grew up in: Northfield

Job: Founder and chief executive officer, Admission Possible

Degrees: B.A., political science, Carleton College; M.A., political science, University of North Carolina; M.A., public administration, Kennedy School, Harvard University.
