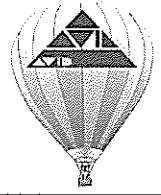


ACCESS



Fall 1994

AVID AS THE CATALYST FOR SCHOOLWIDE CHANGE

Mary Catherine Swanson, AVID Founder

Fifteen years ago, Clairemont High School in the San Diego Unified School District lost the most affluent half of its student body to a newly built high school, and under the district's court-ordered integration mandate, had 500 ethnic minority and low income students bused into the previously all white school. These new students did not come with the academic backgrounds to which the teachers were accustomed, and the students brought with them a cultural and language diversity that was foreign to the school staff. The majority of the all Anglo teaching staff had opened the school twenty-five years earlier and were used to

sending more than 80% of the student body to college. Many who could find teaching jobs elsewhere did so. Many who stayed were angry and frightened about what the district had "done to their school."

Four years later, 25% of the faculty met regularly with students to become reflective practitioners and learners; they had devised a writing-for-learning curriculum with local postsecondary institutions; the ethnic minority students had become school leaders; parents were involved on school advisory boards and in school activities; and community/business partnerships had been developed. The school be-

came the third largest feeder school to the University of California at San Diego, although it had the lowest high school enrollment of any high school in the district. It enrolled more students with part-time jobs in San Diego County postsecondary institutions in academic programs than any of the 17 high schools in the district. The school's standardized test scores increased 46.6% higher in language and 35% higher in mathematics than the scores of the rest of the district.¹

Through the AVID program, this school had embraced the Goals of America 2000 more than ten years before those goals were

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URI TREISMAN: Balancing the Access Equation

Dr. Uri Treisman's accomplishments, which include ground breaking research at the University of California at Berkeley, recognition by the Charles A. Dana Foundation, and, most recently, a "genius grant" from the MacArthur Foundation, have made him a popular and convincing spokesperson for the cause of access to higher education for underrepresented students.

During his August 17 keynote address to over a thousand edu-

cators at the sixth annual AVID Summer Institute in San Diego, the renowned mathematics educator, University of Texas professor and senior program consultant for the Dana Foundation reminded the conference participants that more than advanced degrees are at stake.

"Democracy is fragile," he said. "History has taught us that it can easily be destroyed by poverty and racial polarization. We must fight against separatism, the idea

of 'we versus they.' What we do in schools is central to democracy."

Treisman cautioned educators that they are in danger of falling prey to the kind of thinking that the anthropologist Malinowski discovered when he studied the Trobriand islanders.

"The Trobriand Islanders had come to believe their myths as truths", Treisman said. "We're guilty of the same in education. For example, we have come to be-

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lieve the myth that education is responsible for the failure of U.S. competition, when we are actually more productive than other nations in almost every area. We also have debilitating myths about who can succeed in school. We believe the myth that money doesn't matter in education. In reality, it does matter and can make a major difference when it's given to teachers."

Treisman, who chairs AVID's National Dissemination Board, uncovered some pervasive and dangerous myths while teaching mathematics at UC Berkeley over ten years ago. Two groups of students, he discovered, defied achievement trends at a university renowned for its academic rigor. Chinese-American students excelled at a rate far beyond the average, while African-American students failed first-term calculus at a rate much higher than the norm. However, Treisman noted in his speech, the reasons for the failure had nothing to do with common myths about lack of achievement, as he learned when he spent eighteen months closely monitoring the two groups of students, viewing them in class, during social time, and even on dates.

"The assumption was that the low-achieving African-American students suffered from lack of motivation, low SAT scores, had poor family background or low income status," Treisman said. "We discovered all of these myths were wrong."

Treisman found that the African-American students were actually a highly motivated and diverse group of students, whose SAT scores were excellent and whose economic status and family support were not below par at all. "In fact," he said, "many of

them were the children of educators. These students had paid the price."

However, cultural factors did play a part in the performance of both Chinese and African-American students, Treisman learned. "We discovered that, for African-American and Latino students, school was a 'stopping place,' as if they were driving through. They kept their social lives separate from their academic lives and they—along with blue collar white students—had no network. On the other hand, Asian students blended everything together, hung out and socialized while studying, and even worked on their math together while watching TV."

Isolation was a key impediment to African-American students, whose previous successes had been built upon a strong work ethic and self-reliance. As they suffered their first failures in calculus, they applied their previous formula for achievement, spending more time studying alone, yet, they continued to fail.

Applying what he had observed in Asian students, who worked together in what they called "study gangs," Treisman developed his Mathematics Workshop through the university's Professional Development Program. Students learned to work collaboratively in small groups to accelerate, not remediate.

The results were gratifying. Previous to the workshop, the failure rate for African-American students in calculus had been 60 percent. After the workshop, African-American students who participated in the program had only a 4 percent failure rate, with significant increases in "B" level grades, and far more African-American students were receiving bachelor's degrees in math-related fields.

Today, Treisman is at the Uni-

versity of Texas, where the mathematics department has created a particularly effective adaptation of his Berkeley work.

"Five years ago our math classes were not integrated," he told the San Diego audience. "Today, we have over 130 African-American and Latino math majors. We simply had to figure out how to create math and science people who mirrored our overall population."

Following Treisman's speech, ACCESS caught up with him to discuss a number of issues raised in his speech and to talk about his interest in the AVID program.

ACCESS: You have been a member of AVID's National Dissemination Board for two years. What drew you into the program?

TREISMAN: I recognized that it paralleled work I was doing, and I admired Mary Catherine Swanson's brilliant construction. I was also drawn to the program's goal of making schools a vehicle of upward mobility. AVID is a rare example of an access program that doesn't compromise academic standards. It doesn't assume that its students need to be fixed, but instead that they deserve richer opportunities. This requires a leap of faith on the part of some educators and I wanted to support it.

ACCESS: In your speech, you discussed AVID as a 'core feature' of schools. Why is this an important approach?

TREISMAN: In early implementation it is important that one start small and carry out our work as an experiment. But when we gain support, the strategy needs to change. We know AVID works, so we're morally bound to disseminate it. Now we must think of it as a core service, particularly for students who fit the program's profile. More importantly, when a program like AVID

gets larger, it cannot be based only on its very committed teachers. At some point, the responsibility must shift to the system.

ACCESS: You draw a strong distinction between acceleration and remediation. Why don't remedial courses work?

TREISMAN: This is a difficult question because the people who operate remedial courses care deeply about their students. They start from where they think their students are. But when you step back, you see that these students need more, not less. There's something fundamentally wrong with remediation, but it is not typically racist or immoral in its intent. This deficit approach is like seeing someone as sick and wanting to give them medicine. Too frequently, when educators look at minority students, they think of medicine. When they look at suburban, majority students, they think nourishment. What AVID students need is nourishment. Remedial programs don't work for a lot of other reasons as well. Remedial programs narrow the range of opportunity for students. If we create a more mixed, richer environment, kids can see others who have made positive choices.

ACCESS: You've discussed the uniqueness of AVID, as far as its development and dissemination. How is it different from other reform efforts?

TREISMAN: Most successful curricular reform efforts have come from university scholars like Ted Sizer (Coalition of Essential Schools) or James Comer (Comer Schools Program), with accompanying political sophistication. These are 'top down' programs with a 'bottom up' rhetoric. AVID is a 'bottom up' effort created by teachers. We have almost no other successful examples of this.

ACCESS: What have you

learned from being on AVID's National Dissemination Board?

TREISMAN: I've learned that AVID is so unusual, it's hard to know how to promote it. AVID is an example of the 'ramping up' problem. What doesn't exist is a system to make teacher-created change a core feature of our schools. We need a policy instrument for when an effective strategy reaches a saturation point, to shift the responsibility from the creator to the system. We have to create routes for change that don't currently exist.

"Democracy is fragile. History has taught us that it can easily be destroyed by poverty and racial polarization. We must fight against separatism, the idea of 'we versus they.' What we do in schools is central to democracy."

Uri Treisman, 1994

ACCESS: How would you characterize postsecondary education's response to underrepresented students?

TREISMAN: Postsecondary education, to use a Sherlock Holmes phrase, is 'the dog that didn't bark.' For the most part, higher education has not figured out how to form alliances with programs like AVID that are really in its own best interest. Only when forced do many universities maximize change for underrepresented students. The full intellectual premise of universities has not been brought to bear on this, and it is a major embarrassment. When success-

ful efforts created by teachers exist, we need to figure out how to develop links between university and high school facilities.

ACCESS: When you were awarded the MacArthur Fellowship, did this validate your work and make you feel that perhaps the system can change?

TREISMAN: In a funny way, yes. It's wonderful to get recognition, and there were some individuals who have made things difficult along the way, so it helps. But it also has a bitter-sweet feel because the award marks you as an exception. I have many friends in the MacArthur circle, and we know we're not really exceptions. There are others who do good work as well.

ACCESS: After spending much of your career in California, you are now teaching at the University of Texas. What encourages you about your work here?

TREISMAN: What's inspiring for me about Texas is that they don't have the history of educational reform that California does. Texas is about a decade behind in developing vehicles for teaching leadership, and it is fantastic being able to mobilize a lot of people.

ACCESS: What mistakes do schools make in our attempts to provide education for an increasingly multicultural population of students?

TREISMAN: Schools make many mistakes. One is the reliance on pull-out programs that effectively track students. Equally dangerous are programs that create a focus on ethnic separatism. It is one thing to identify differences but another to celebrate commonalities. We need to look at multiculturalism as a reality, rather than a goal. What we have in common is far greater than what separates us.

Uri Treisman: A Snapshot

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Honorary Degree, Doctor of Human

Letters, Marymount Manhattan College,

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Many, many teachers

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