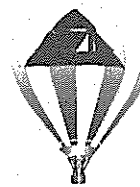


ACCESS



Spring 1995

The Power of AVID Site Teams

by Mary Catherine Swanson, AVID Founder and Director

History Of The AVID Team

Since the inception of AVID in 1980, interdisciplinary site teams have driven the schoolwide changes sought by AVID and have provided a framework for examining effective teaching and learning practices. The impetus for the first AVID site team was students. As students were participating regularly in collaborative study groups within their AVID elective class, they became keenly aware of teaching practices that allowed them to learn well and of practices which inhibited their learning. As tutors and I jotted down what the students were telling us, we found that teaching practices fell into patterns; they were rarely isolated

procedures. We also had the distinct belief that most teachers were in an established routine and were truly unaware of the deleterious effects of some of the less effective pedagogy.

During the second semester of the first year of AVID's inception, the college tutors and I asked the students if they would like to have organized conversations with teachers regarding what worked well for them in class and what made learning difficult. The students, with some trepidation yet hopeful excitement, agreed. As a group we developed two ground rules for the meeting: 1) The conversations must focus on teaching practices, not personalities, and 2) The students must

present their ideas in such a way that no teacher would ever know the identity of a specific teacher being discussed. Several students agreed to represent the group and focus on two or three teaching methodologies which were most distressing to students. We practiced and practiced our conversation. The students felt very special to be able to speak for the group and in no way wished to violate the trust placed in them.

Collectively, the AVID students invited all the faculty to join them for an hour after school for discussions about teaching and learning. The students prepared an international food feast for the teachers. Twenty-five out of

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Gene I. Maeroff: Team Building To Improve Student Learning

Current restructuring and school improvement efforts in U.S. education have led to many new strategies for creating renewed learning communities. One practice altering the way in which schools operate is the development of teams of educators to initiate schoolwide change and thus create better student performance.

Gene I. Maeroff, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, has been a leader in studying and

writing about how effective teams are created and how these groups can impact a school's culture and performance. His most recent book, *Team Building for School Change* (Teachers College Press, 1993), details the conditions necessary for successful teams and provides examples based on Maeroff's extensive research in a wide variety of schools and districts in both Michigan and New Mexico.

The book provides educators with a history of team building,

and a look at the communication networks necessary for successful teams, strategies for avoiding conflict and burnout, as well as the roles that teachers and administrators must assume in successful educational teams.

Studying education is nothing new to Maeroff, who was formerly the national education correspondent for the New York Times. He has worked with the Carnegie Foundation since 1986 and his other books include *The*

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eighty faculty arrived — all were curious. Some truly looked forward to the dialog; others wanted to make sure that they weren't being talked about behind their backs. The teachers had two ground rules also: 1) It was to be a problem-solving rather than a gripe session, and 2) They couldn't blame students for the situations.

The site principal came to the initial meeting and announced to those present that he would be at all subsequent meetings. He left his walkie-talkie in the office, and we established another meeting rule. These site team meetings would be "sacred time" for conversations among students and teachers. No interruptions would be allowed. The principal's constant participation was most certainly a key to our success. Not only did it convey to the faculty that the meetings were important, but the group also knew that we had the power to make substantive changes in curriculum, pedagogy, and school organization.

Addressing The Issues

Somewhat timidly the students began their presentations. They were so obviously sincere in their quest that the teachers listened carefully, and began to share ideas for better teaching. The science members agreed not to quiz students immediately following films, but rather to allow students to take notes, meet in collaborative groups to discuss the films, and then to take a quiz. This gave the limited English speakers better access to the information. The mathematics members agreed not to merely assign homework following a lecture, but rather to give some "homework" problems to groups of students in class to solve and allow them to report on their solutions so that process commentary could occur.

Some of the issues students shared were too sensitive to dis-

cuss with students present, and so occasionally the teachers met alone. One such case was when the U.S. History Department decided to adopt parallel texts with different colored covers — one with a 12th grade vocabulary, and the other with an 8th grade vocabulary. The AVID students were to receive the easier text; they felt this meant that the teachers didn't respect them. The issue was solved through site based research. Two classes used the more difficult text for a semester, while one class used the easier text. Students using the more difficult text performed better on exams than those using the other text, and the following semester, the more difficult text was used with all students.

This site team met every other week to ask students how things were going. Teachers would drop best ideas and assignments by my room, which the AVID tutors would duplicate for the entire staff. The total staff always knew what we were doing and was always invited to attend our meetings. The original twenty-five faculty were consistent team members; others dropped in and out as they had specific problems they wished to solve with students.

Link To Universities

After this team had worked together for a year and a half, they decided to meet with area professors of freshman level college courses to discuss curriculum, pedagogy, and grading standards. If we were going to enroll a group of students in college who traditionally did not attend postsecondary education, we wanted to know that we were preparing them well for the rigors of college work.

Not surprisingly, these high school teachers were much more aware of methodology which opened access to rigorous cur-

riculum than were the university instructors. From our site team meetings and subsequent practice, the high school teachers were convinced that writing-for-learning in all subjects, inquiry method, and collaborative grouping were key to students' learning. After several meetings in which there was little agreement regarding assignments or grading standards, the group agreed to develop grading rubrics and writing assignments for various subjects so that the students were taught to write as an historian or scientist would write. We learned that such expectations were present in students' college courses, but were taught neither at the high school nor the college level. The newly developed lessons were "team taught" by high school and college instructors in our high school classes. Subsequently, a revised version of these writing discourse mode lessons became the California Direct Assessment in Writing Models.

Effects Of The Site Team

The effects of the site team meetings were life-altering for both students and teachers. The students felt they were being listened to, that they were in control

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ACCESS is published quarterly through the AVID Center at the San Diego County Office of Education, 6401 Linda Vista Road, San Diego, CA 92111-7399. Phone: (619) 292-3559. FAX: (619) 541-0265. E Mail address: avid@sdcoe.k12.ca.us The AVID Center acknowledges the support of Dr. Carol Pugmire, Assistant Superintendent, Instructional Services, SDCOE, and Dr. Rudy M. Castruita, County Superintendent of Schools. Editor Robert Gira Director Mary Catherine Swanson

of their learning, that their ideas were respected; in many ways they felt they were teachers' colleagues. It was not uncommon for visitors to the campus to comment that the high school resembled the ambiance of a college campus. Teachers experienced a new efficacy. We felt that we were meeting the needs of the growing diversity of the student body and that we were no longer operating in isolation — an empowered group of teachers and students could tackle and solve any problem. Not all teachers joined our group, but they respected our work and would often ask us questions about how to teach better.

The students' work improved, and the teachers' work improved. The site team constantly provided snippets of good ideas to the total faculty along with good news about student success. Morale, as well as student achievement, soared.

Purpose Of The Site Team

The purpose of an AVID site team is to provide a framework for systematic reflection about classroom experiences among students and teachers and to promote collegial interaction within an individual school. The experience of being a member of the first AVID site team is the most invigorating professional experience I have had in almost thirty years in this profession.

In his recent book, *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*, Seymour Sarason states unequivocally that unless students are given "the right and responsibility to participate in forums where the constitution of the classroom is forged," any attempts at improving student outcomes through educational reform are doomed to fail. He says, "The sense of powerlessness breeds reduced interest and motivation, at its best a kind of passionless conformity and at

worst a rejection of learning. When one has no stake in the way things are, when one sees oneself as the object of unilateral actions, it takes no particular wisdom to suggest that one would rather be elsewhere." I have taught in schools in which students' voices were ignored and in a school in which students were teachers' partners. Believe me, the latter is crucial to healthy development for both students and teachers.

Perhaps it is because ethnic and linguistic minority youth have for so long been systematically denied voice that we have many of the problems schools encounter. It seems obvious to me that the reason why so many multicultural programs fail parallels why so many educational reform efforts don't make a difference — the issue of voice is not addressed. Of course, it is far easier to tamper with curriculum or adopt a school's mission than to redesign ways in which teachers, students, and administrators relate to one another. To ignore the voices of the students is to ensure that no real change, no educational reform, occurs.

An AVID site team not only affords students the opportunity to express what is or is not working for them in the school, but also allows teachers to constantly revise and check their perceptions through students' eyes. While no one strategy is the be-all and end-all for structures within the school, to create a more effective teaching/learning environment, an overwhelming amount of research supports schoolwide collaboration as the single most effective way to achieve mutually reinforcing goals. A collaborative school culture is a process involving the total school constituency and is based on the establishment of the common goals of creating classrooms and school communities that care and

support all students and teachers.

Certainly, many other strategies exist for creating within our schools a caring climate and opportunities to participate and experience success — for example, reduced class size, ungraded schools, intergenerational programs, cross-age tutoring, mentoring, and many other specific peer resource programs such as buddy systems, peer tutoring, peer education, peer helping, and peer support groups. However, unless a collaborative learning structure is infused schoolwide, these programs become mere add-ons, more ineffective "tinkering" and not the structural, systemic change that will truly transform the school culture and from which other various strategies will naturally flow.

An AVID site team affords both students and teachers the opportunities to try new approaches and consistently check these new ideas for effectiveness. No greater power exists for creating schools which meet the needs of a diverse population.

Maeroff

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School Smart Parent, The Empowerment of Teachers: Overcoming the Crisis of Confidence, Don't Blame the Kids: The Trouble With America's Public Schools, School and College: Partnerships in Education, The Guide to Suburban Schools, and Sources of Inspiration. These works, and his articles for publications such as the Phi Delta Kappan, Education Week, and the New York Times Magazine, have earned him honors from the Education Writers Association, the International Reading Association, and the American Association of University Professors.

Maeroff's most recent work for

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