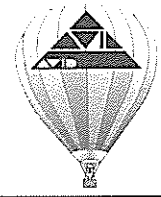


ACCESS



Fall 1996

AVID Center: The Calling of a Teacher

by Mary Catherine Swanson, AVID Founder and Director

This fall marks a new era for AVID, one that is a bit overwhelming to a high school teacher. At McConaughy House, 2490 Heritage Park Row, San Diego, California 92110, the AVID Center, a 501c3 nonprofit organization, is officially born. The purpose of the Center is to disseminate and support AVID programs throughout the world in order to promote the greatest experiment in democracy, the education of all peoples. The birth of the Center, from one classroom at Clairemont High School in San Diego to more than 500 schools and 20,000 students, although unintended, has been a step-by-step, carefully contemplated and researched process.

The history of AVID is the history of all good teachers

everywhere. Teachers are born to respond to the needs of their students, to meet them "where they are" and to challenge and nurture them to become all that they can be. To do less is to forego the privilege of being called "teacher."

I began teaching in the 60's when schools in California were heavily tracked. As a new teacher I was assigned five classes of remedial English. The students ranged in age from 13 to 19. All of them hated "English." Actually, they had never had an English class. They had had remedial reading for nine or more years of their school careers. It was my job to bring dignity to these defeated students, to convince them that they could be academically successful and to interest them in

reading. We made a game of the course required "drill and kill" activities and filled the classroom with books they wanted to read. They read and I read to them. The faster and more accurately they completed the drills, the more they got to read. At the end of the semester, all my "remedial" students averaged at least two years of growth for six months of instruction. They were finally enrolled in real English classes.

Teaching in the 70's brought a unique challenge. It was the decade of "relevance." Whatever a student did was somehow sacred because it was his or hers. This was a particularly difficult time for an English teacher. Students wrote "essays" which I could not

Continued on page 2

Dr. Eric J. Smith: Making Student Achievement A District Focus

The Fall 1996 ACCESS Interview

With many urban school districts serving increasing numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including more single-parent families, lower income levels, and lack of college-going background in the family, the temptation might be to turn efforts away from rigorous academics and toward more basic and even remedial needs.

However, for Dr. Eric J. Smith, the recently appointed superintendent of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in Charlotte, North Carolina, providing an academic challenge to all students, especially those who have not traditionally been successful, has been a priority—first during his two years as superintendent in Danville, Virginia, and then as su-

perintendent in Newport News, Virginia. His experiences in those two districts should serve him well in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, the 26th largest school district in the U.S., located in the largest urban area between Washington D.C. and Atlanta.

Urban areas face common obstacles, says Smith, whether one is

Continued on page 4

Smith

Continued from page 1

discussing Virginia, North Carolina, or California.

"Newport News is a good example," he says. "It is a very dynamic city, and an area with a strong government and business leadership. Yet the challenges were the same that face most urban areas in the U.S. We saw more children from low income families, single parent homes, and an increasing number of

parents with minimal education."

Smith, who served in Newport News from 1992 to 1995, studied the Newport News district upon taking the superintendency, talked to parents, teachers, and the business community, and took a number of steps to guarantee that all students were academically challenged. He began his efforts in 1992 with a curriculum audit to focus on improved student achievement. Shortly after this,

Newport News schools implemented several programs that produced positive results. These included Reading Recovery, the International Baccalaureate Program, College Board Pacesetter courses, and the AVID Program.

Smith, whose doctorate is in curriculum and instruction, discovered AVID in an unusual manner.

"It was serendipitous, but a little bizarre," he recalls. "In 1993,

Continued on next page

Calling

Continued from page 3

- I recognized writing to be an important key to academic progress. As a result, we began to focus in the AVID classroom on numerous writing-to-learn activities. Clairemont faculty members joined college professors to discuss the writing domains necessary for success in college. These later became the basis for the writing portion of California's statewide assessment system. Further, we discovered that a constant focus on inquiry and collaboration within the AVID classroom improved performance. Today, we refer to these as WIC methodologies, and writing, inquiry, and collaboration remain essential to any AVID program.
- As I studied school reform, I observed that efforts often focused on students at the top and at the bottom of the achievement ladder. However, a large group was neglected. In fact, AVID works best for underachieving students in the middle. The target population for AVID is indeed the students whose previous grades in non-rigorous courses have resulted in a 2.0 to 3.0 grade point average.

Today, AVID's high school and middle level curriculum, staff de-

velopment, and approach to school restructuring are formalized and recognizable to all of our teachers and site teams throughout the world.

It is obvious that a program as broad as AVID can no longer be under the auspices of a California County Office of Education, and so a teacher is now organizing a non-profit organization so that the program can continue its research and development and serve the schools and districts that request the program. This was not a predictable journey for this educator but one which must be taken.

Today I look with pride at my first AVID graduates — Maximo Escobedo who holds two bachelor's degrees from prestigious universities and is a senior graphic designer with a large software firm. His former classmate, Clarence Fields, received his degree in business and is now an executive with one of the largest document companies in the world. Alicia Gallegos teaches English at a junior high school and is working on her master's degree. Franco Simone earned his doctor of jurisprudence and has opened his own law firm. These young adults are leaders in their communities, and they along with other AVID graduates, have begun the AVID Alumni As-

sociation so that they can give back to the communities and programs that have led them to where they are today.

Teachers, too, have the responsibility to give to their students the legacy from which they proceed. Educators must see themselves as a community of conscience dedicated to preserving human dignity for all. Education gives the wit and will to reshape civilization closer to our ideals than we have been able to do in the past. Schools give us the capacity to move people out of the shadows of the past and into a new era of light. And so this educator once again asks for the privilege of being called teacher by heeding the call to the needs of today's students through developing the AVID Center.

I have had the privilege to know, to influence, and to nurture the lives of fine young people — of Maximo, Clarence, Alicia, and Franco. All educators have this same opportunity.

Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Surely, AVID educators are one of those groups.

Smith

Continued from page 4

I went to a staff development conference in New Orleans, sponsored by a friend of mine. I got to the opening session late, sat in back, and ended up next to a teacher from California who said she taught AVID. She ended up being a lot more interesting than the keynote speaker. We talked right through lunch, and her enthusiasm and description of AVID was intriguing. When I returned, I told my staff to track down this AVID program."

Soon after, Newport News initiated one AVID class, but within a year had implemented the program in all of its middle schools and high schools for nearly 1000 students. Today, the district, which serves just over 32,000 total students, has over 1,500 AVID students.

Recently, Dr. Smith, who was recognized for his efforts with the "Breaking the Mold" award from Business Week magazine, agreed to an interview with ACCESS, focusing on the challenges of urban districts and the support AVID can provide.

ACCESS: What does a superintendent consider in addressing the challenges to a district that wants to maintain academic excellence but is struggling with the issues facing many districts?

SMITH: The problems of public education in America's urban areas are consistent across the country. As I examined Newport News, I found the teachers to be dedicated and ready to do the job. The same was true with the administration and the community. What was lacking was a sense of confidence that a better job could be done. It wasn't a matter of skill. I saw frustration on the part of teachers and administrators who were working harder but felt they were spinning their wheels.

That was where AVID helped for many reasons. The whole notion of peer pressure in middle school and high school is overwhelming. The idea that it's not cool to look smart, carry your books and be a serious student works against the teacher. I was looking for a way to change the culture and tone of our district, and I wanted to see kids who were eager to learn.

ACCESS: When Newport News fully implemented AVID, you focused significant efforts on the middle level, building a large base of students there. What were you hoping to achieve with this approach?

SMITH: I wanted to create a culture of success for students who are traditionally unsuccessful. Additionally, I knew that we had done a great deal at the elementary level to provide the foundation for future success, with massive pre-K programs, along with literacy, and mathematics efforts. We wanted students to leave fifth grade prepared academically. But our fear was that when they went to middle school they would be distracted and influenced by their peers, pulled away from academics. Parents told me that they were hungry for a system of support, a daily structure to keep the focus on rigorous academics. AVID does this. Moreover, while we'd like to say there is no racism or bias in our system, we know that, typically without malice, it does occur. We needed advocates within the system who would not make excuses for the students, but would keep the expectations and support high, just as a parent would. AVID coordinators provide this.

ACCESS: What were some of the benefits—long term and short term—that you observed after implementing AVID?

SMITH: Immediately, we started to see changes in schools' cultures. I saw dramatic changes in the attitude of teachers and administrators. Students who were previously disruptive or not engaged were now sitting in the front rows of their classes, notebooks out, learning how to ask the right questions. Teachers were thrilled to get AVID students into their classes. And students recognized the program's impact. I recall a presentation that our AVID students did for state legislators, and the comment that one young man made. He said, "AVID is like having your mom with you at school." Also, when the first high school AVID students began to have academic success, they started to receive letters from major universities. Usually, this only happens for athletes. That really caused the word to spread among the kids.

ACCESS: What was the community's reaction when you decided to significantly expand the AVID program?

SMITH: It was one of the more enjoyable experiences I've had as an educator. After we decided to expand the program, with the support of the school board and the city council, and with state legislative support, we started to advertise that students could sign up for AVID. The parent reaction was overwhelming. Contrary to the typical parent gatherings, we had standing room only for the AVID information meetings. I think they felt they were lining up for the American Dream. However, since we believed in individual determination, we did not arbitrarily assign students to the program. Parents and students had to show a real interest and commitment. I also noticed that support from the business community was overwhelming,

Continued on next page

Smith

Continued from page 5

as was the support from the PTSA and the local NAACP chapter.

ACCESS: Newport News progressed rapidly from its initial implementation of one AVID class to nearly 1000 students, and now over 1500 AVID students. What are some of the cautions or considerations you would stress for districts that want AVID to impact a large number of students?

SMITH: One of my cautions is that you must control the selection of AVID personnel. Unfortunately, some people view a program like AVID as a place to assign less skilled teachers. Instead, a district must look for the Advanced Placement teachers, the experienced teachers from the college track. Secondly, I would stress training, training, and more training. The board and superintendent must be prepared to invest in this program the kind of dollars that are necessary. You must strategically plan how you will get the training necessary for AVID teachers, along with site administrators and teachers from throughout the school. Remem-

ber that AVID represents a change not only for students but also for teachers and administrators.

ACCESS: Do you recommend local adaptations of the AVID program?

SMITH: Yes and no. Local programs can supplement the AVID program but should not interfere with its integrity. Most school systems, if they are looking at AVID as an approach that they want, will find that there are a number of programs that sound similar and are well meaning and are locally well received politically. But the prescriptive nature of the AVID essentials needs to be followed.

ACCESS: Does AVID mesh well with other reform efforts?

SMITH: Absolutely. In fact, it can be a centerpiece. I am amused when I hear all the discussion about increased standards for students. We can talk about increased expectations, but if we provide no support, then it is just empty rhetoric. AVID can be an essential component of a district's reform efforts, if those efforts are defined as increased productivity and student achievement.

ACCESS: What are the misperceptions that some teachers and administrators have about AVID?

SMITH: The biggest misconception is that is a remedial program, and this is a deadly mistake. Initially, on a few occasions, I had to step in and explain that AVID is a college preparatory program. We learned through our own implementation in Newport News that there is a lot of misplaced sympathy and excuse making for disadvantaged students. We need to stop that and make sure that our expectations are rigorous.

ACCESS: What kind of statistical gains can districts expect from implementing AVID?

SMITH: You'll see an increase in test scores at both the middle school and high school level. Districts can also anticipate increased minority participation in Advanced Placement courses. Ultimately, you can also expect an increase in SAT achievement by students not traditionally successful. And, one thing we noted was a reduction in discipline problems. As a superintendent, I'll take any one of those results.

News from California Region 3

by Marilyn McConnell, AVID Regional Coordinator, Sacramento, California

It has been five years since the Sacramento County Office of Education began working with the first Capital Region AVID schools. Four of those first schools had their first AVID graduates in 1996, students who started as freshmen in AVID. These sites include Valley High School in the Elk Grove District; Cordova High School, Folsom Cordova District; John F. Kennedy High School, Sacramento City District; and Rio Americano High School, San Juan District. There are now 17 AVID high schools

and six middle schools in Region 3 serving 963 students.

During the start of AVID in northern California, the Sacramento County Office of Education supported new schools in Regions 6, 4, 2, and 1, as well as its own Region 3, providing information presentations, coordinator workshops, site team meetings, visits to many schools, and an AVID Summer Institute the last two years. By the end of the 1995-96 school year there were 31 AVID schools outside Region 3 associ-

ated with the Capital Region AVID Center.

In 1995, Valley High School in Elk Grove was named an AVID National Demonstration School for Region 3 and East Union in Manteca for Region 6 was also selected. Teams from these sites attended the Demonstration School Training in San Diego and continued with workshops during the year at the Capital Region AVID Center. In the summer of 1996, Center Junior High School from Center Unified School Dis-

Continued on next page