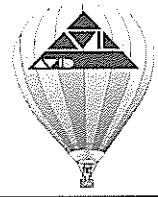


ACCESS



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

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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

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interpret. A typical conversation with a student went something like this:

"Could you read this essay aloud to me and explain your point to me?"

To which the student would reply:

"I knew what I meant to say. But I no longer remember what it means. But I know it is good because I meant what I said when I said it."

It was in the early 70's that I began calling my high school English courses "Project English," determined that I would not become a victim of irrelevance nor would I allow my students to meet the same fate. The students and I would discuss their interests and together we would choose novels and other literature related to their interests. They were required to have at least four peers critique their writing before it was read by me. Most of these students went on to college; the program met the needs of the students of the 70's.

In 1980, the average classroom in San Diego was comprised of 32 students. Three were Black, four were Asian, eight were Latino, and seventeen were white. Of these, five were limited in their knowledge of English. Six were at risk of dropping out of school. Seven would fail the class, and three were in special education classes for those with seriously impaired learning abilities. The demographics of Clairemont High School, where I was English Department chair, had shifted even more dramatically than that reflected by the rest of the district. It was then that I became involved in planning and implementing a major academic intervention in the lives of underachieving, underserved students in the

middle; AVID was born as an academic acceleration program. I chose the acronym from the Latin "avidus," meaning "eager for knowledge." I had no idea it would so impact the world of education.

Because the AVID students, enrolled in the most academic courses the school offered, worked together in subject-specific study teams, supported by a group of dedicated tutors and their teachers, the difficulties that we encountered became problems for us to solve together. We kept each other from saying, "I can't!" and said instead, "I can."

By 1984, the original 30 AVID students graduated from Clairemont High School. They had a cumulative grade point average of 3.2 and all enrolled in institutions of higher education — 28 in four-year universities, and 2 in community colleges.

Events have moved swiftly since that time. The economic and educational upheaval that persisted through the 80's and 90's requires that all students be better prepared for postsecondary education so that those who enroll reflect the demographics of society.

In 1986, I was invited to join the San Diego County Office of Education, in order to disseminate the AVID Program within the county. After 20 years of teaching, leaving the classroom was not an easy decision, but many schools within San Diego were becoming interested in the program, and my work at Clairemont had forced me to look at some significant research about the education and the future of our young people, including:

- Only 8.3% of all bachelor's degrees awarded in the United States are earned by African-American, Latinos, and Native-Americans combined. (Framework for a National Ac-

tion Plan 1990-2000, Report of a Convocation)

- The percentage of students whose families receive welfare has increased by 68% since 1982. (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993)
- By the year 2000, two in three California students will be Latino, African American, or Asian-American—up from one in two today. (California Department of Education, 1993)
- Today there are five workers within California for every retired person. By the year 2000, there will be two workers per retired person, and more than half of those will be from diverse populations. (Newsweek, May 1993)
- The market value of a high school diploma is falling. The proportion of men between the ages of 25 and 54 with high school diplomas who earn less than enough to support a family of four above the poverty line is growing alarmingly. (SCANS Report, 1992)
- The college-going rate for California's high school graduates fell from 60.1 per cent in 1985 to 53.2 per cent in 1994. (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 1995)

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ACCESS is provided free to all AVID sites. Yearly subscriptions for other organizations are \$20. Checks should be made payable to AVID Center.

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Beginning in 1986, I worked with schools and districts throughout San Diego County, to formalize the AVID Program. I met with area superintendents and formed an advisory board, worked with schools to examine data on underserved students, wrote and published the AVID high school curriculum (since revised), and created a staff development model that has become the basis for expansion throughout the United States.

AVID now serves all the high schools in San Diego County and 55 middle schools as well. More than 5,000 graduates have moved on to college at a 92% rate. Most of these students are the first in their families to attend college and their enrollment in four-year colleges far exceeds that of others traditionally underserved by postsecondary institutions.

Today AVID programs in San Diego County serve over 8,000 students, with California enrollment nearing 18,000 at over 300 schools. In addition, states such as Virginia, Kentucky, Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, Missouri, and North Carolina now feature AVID programs, as well as the Department of Defense Dependents Schools in Europe, Asia, and Central America.

As a teacher, AVID forced me to look beyond my own English discipline and network with colleagues across campus. What did mathematics teachers require? How could I assist students in science? This was new territory for me. Perhaps more importantly, I discovered that, if I were to be successful in preparing my AVID students, I had to communicate with colleges and universities to discover what our students needed to know and be able to do.

During the program's inception, I quickly discovered the key aspects necessary if the AVID elective were to assist our students:

- To succeed in rigorous curriculum, students needed organizational and study skills. I provided them with binders which they filled with notes, graphic organizers, and test-taking tips. Over the last 15 years, the AVID binder has become one of the program's important symbols and a source of pride for students. At the time, it seemed simply a practical survival tool.
- Realizing that I "couldn't do it all," I recruited college students as tutors within the AVID classroom. They led subject-specific tutorial groups based on the notes students took and the

questions they developed. Today, we hold numerous tutor training sessions throughout the world, with a formalized development system for teachers, tutors, and students.

- Venturing into the unknown, I relied on the collaborative support of my colleagues. They allowed tutors to attend their classes in order to assist students with notetaking and to help them grasp key concepts. Faculty members also began to participate in discussions with me, the AVID students, and the tutors, focusing on what steps we could take to make students successful in rigorous curriculum. This "think tank" became the basis for the AVID site team, now a key program component.

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A Call for AVID Stories

As I visit AVID classrooms around the world, I am constantly awed at the work to which AVID teachers dedicate themselves and the tremendous obstacles which AVID students and their families overcome in order to experience the American promise.

Although one of these years I intend to travel the AVID classrooms of the world and write the stories of the teachers, students, and parents who give of themselves daily, until I find the time to do that, I would like to call on you to share your stories with me. These stories will inspire thousands of others to follow in your footsteps.

By the end of 1996 I would like to have collected your experiences—how you have

changed as a teacher, how one of your students and his or her family has changed as a result of AVID. I am more interested in in-depth stories of you and one of your students than short vignettes of many, for it is understanding the deep courage of a few which will most inspire others.

I will collect these tales in a publication for you to share with your colleagues, your students, and with the public. Imagine the impact such a publication will have! Please send your manuscripts to: Mary Catherine Swanson, AVID Center, McConaughy House, 2490 Heritage Park Row, San Diego, CA 92110. You cannot imagine how much I look forward to reading what you submit!

*Mary Catherine Swanson,
AVID Founder and Director*

Smith

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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,

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- 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.