



ACCESS



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AVID and a Complex Postsecondary World

Mary Catherine Swanson, AVID Founder

Seldom have the topics of education and employment been intertwined in discussion more than they have recently within the United States. Educational reform documents such as the U.S. Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) (1991) and California's High School Task Force Report, *Second to None* (1992) focused their attention on the readiness of high school graduates for the world of work as well as for education beyond high school.

Both reports, along with Federal legislation to encourage schools to develop a School-to-Work approach, pose important questions. What should students know and be able to do when they graduate from the K-12

system? What are the competencies necessary for successful employees? Should the K-12 system be more responsive to the concerns of employers? To add to the debate, in 1995, some leaders in the U.S. Congress and Senate proposed the elimination of the Department of Education as a separate entity, noting that it should become part of the Department of Labor. At the same time, affirmative action policies in both workplace and educational settings have been called into question, and the position of disadvantaged and underrepresented minorities at work and in school has become increasingly precarious.

For all students, according to the SCANS report, "the market

value of a high school diploma has fallen." The report also notes that the proportion of men between 25 and 54 with only high school diplomas who earn less than enough to support a family of four above the poverty line "is growing alarmingly." For white men in this category, the figure is now one in five; for Hispanics, one in three; and for African American men, two in five. Among all three groups combined, for high school graduates, the percentage in the "low income" category rose from 15% in 1969 to 34% in 1989. Clearly, education beyond high school is a necessity if individuals want a reasonable chance to raise a family above the poverty line.

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Gary Hart: A View into Education Reform

Gary Hart sees education from many perspectives. As a parent, he's had three daughters attend California's public schools. As a teacher, he's instructed at both the community college and the K-12 levels. In the political arena, Hart served as a member of the California State Assembly and Senate for 20 years, and while chairman of the Senate Education Committee (1983-94), authored significant legislation impacting teacher credentialing, school

safety, charter schools, and assessment. Finally, as an educational reformer, Hart now directs the CSU Institute for Education Reform housed at the California State University, Sacramento.

With an overall emphasis on providing assistance to K-12 schools which are involved in restructuring efforts, the Institute, which has been in existence less than a year, will focus on both education reform and teacher training.

When he was approached by CSU Chancellor Barry Munitz with the notion of working together on issues affecting both K-12 and postsecondary education, Hart was enthusiastic. "I jumped at the chance," he says, "because it seemed to be an opportunity to continue what I had begun in the legislature."

With over 20 significant pieces of education or children's legislation to his credit, Hart has

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1993. Add to the picture the fact that 8.2% of California's total population was enrolled in postsecondary education in 1975 compared to a figure of 6.4% in 1992, and it appears that the K-12 system is not sending enough high school graduates to college.

AVID site teams continue to work with disadvantaged students to help them complete rigorous courses and to understand the complex process of applying for and gaining admission to college. At the same time, the AVID Center is not ignoring the recommendations of the SCANS report and has initiated a School to Professional Career curriculum project that will assist AVID students in making the connection to professional careers during their college experience and following their college graduation. The SCANS foundations and competencies are interwoven in the new AVID curriculum, which is being piloted at a number of California high schools during the 1995-96 school year. These efforts are being carried out with the advice and assistance of colleges and universities, along with the consultation of AVID alumni who are now professionals working in business, education, politics, law, and government.

As new structures and curricula are developed within the K-12 system, schools would be wise to involve colleges and universities in the discussion and in the development of new courses. Key questions must be asked. What, for example, will be the impact of School-to-Work efforts on the four-year college enrollment of disadvantaged students? Will structures such as career paths or academies lead more students of all backgrounds to complete the sequence of rigorous courses necessary for

college or university enrollment? Will restructuring efforts increase or limit the options for students and strengthen the curriculum? School-to-Work programs have the potential to broaden and enrich the college preparatory curriculum if properly planned and implemented. Yet School-to-Work programs should not deter qualified students from attending college.

The AVID Program, as it has for the past 15 years, will continue to focus on assisting disadvantaged students in completing the courses necessary for college enrollment. As secondary schools embrace changes suggested in documents such as SCANS and *Second to None*, they would do well to consider the impact on college enrollment for all students, and especially the disadvantaged students whose academic and economic futures are in their hands.

Gary Hart

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received numerous recognitions, including the Albert S. Rodda Award for Lifetime Achievement, presented by the California School Boards Association in 1994. One comprehensive piece of legislation Hart authored, Senate Bill 813, launched an academic surge in California in 1983 and provided the impetus for much of the state's subsequent reform efforts.

"It strengthened graduation requirements and provided an infusion of new money," says Hart. "We had been through long years of neglect in California and SB 813 gave us a fresh start and was consistent with (state superintendent) Bill Honig's reform agenda."

Educational reform remains an important subject to Hart, who

will lead the Institute for Education Reform's efforts to improve student achievement and work directly with schools that are undergoing major restructuring, using alternative assessment techniques, redesigning categorical programs, or becoming charter schools.

Hart, who developed California's Charter School legislation, recognizes that public schools need significant change but notes that the discussion needs to be broadened. Thus, the Institute will sponsor a series of seminars on public policy issues associated with education.

"We want to involve three different communities," he says, "including K-12, state policy makers, and the academic community, which too often are not well connected with one another."

An advocate for programs like AVID, which have demonstrated effectiveness at a reasonable cost, Hart provided the keynote address at the fall AVID conference in San Diego. There he discussed impending changes in the California State University System, including the phasing out of remedial coursework, the need for AVID teachers to reach out to the community, and K-12 education's place in the larger political and social contexts.

Recently, Gary Hart also agreed to an interview with ACCESS.

ACCESS: Your own teaching background varies from high school social studies to college political science instruction. What has changed for teachers since you received your M.A. in education from Harvard in 1966?

HART: At least three things have changed. First, the support system for students is substantially weaker. We have fewer counselors and nurses and

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fewer intact families. When I went back to the classroom three years ago in Sacramento, I noticed the changes in support right away. Secondly, demographics in California have changed significantly. In the 60's we were responding to migrations, but they were largely from within the U.S. We've always had immigrants, but now we get them from all parts of the world, particularly where there's political turbulence, and teachers must contend with a much more varied group of students. Third, the stakes are much higher today. Twenty or thirty years ago, you could just get a high school diploma, enter the working class, and, with some luck and hard work, buy a home, and become part of the middle class. Today, it is far more difficult to get an entry level job with minimal education and be financially secure at the same time.

ACCESS: In a recent article, you discuss narrowing the achievement gap between the 'have's and have not's.' What role do you see AVID playing in this endeavor?

HART: Just as the income gap is widening, so is the academic gap. The biggest challenge facing the education system is to see that a greater percentage of low achieving students perform at a higher level. And, of course, this is why AVID is so important, since it focuses on students with mediocre academic records but who have potential for success. What most of these students don't have is a parental support system, since their parents' educational attainment is limited. AVID provides the support system these 'have not' kids are lacking.

ACCESS: From its inception in 1980, AVID has rejected the idea of remediation as a solution to improving schoolwide performance. How do you view

the current discussion regarding remediation, which is currently a hot topic at colleges and universities throughout California?

HART: It depends on what you mean by remediation. If remediation means that we're going to have a watered-down curriculum and a separate pull-out program during the school day, then we should not pursue it. But sometimes the remediation discussion is good because at least it acknowledges that we have a serious problem. The bottom line is that we need to focus on what's working and what's not working.

ACCESS: What issues should teachers—AVID and otherwise—be focused on right now?

HART: One, I think careful documentation of results is important. The public as well as politicians are skeptical and need to be informed of our successes. Two, a characteristic of American education that must change is the isolation of teachers. They must interact more with their colleagues. The extent to which AVID teachers work with other staff will be significant. Three, we need to do a better job of developing teacher leaders as spokespersons in the community. Because of its success, AVID has credibility and provides a means for teachers to be more visible and effective in education policy discussions.

ACCESS: How do you analyze the School to Career movement and its impact on disadvantaged students?

HART: Like so many things, there are both plusses and minuses, depending on how it's implemented. If School to Work is targeted to break out of the traditional vocational model and provide greater coordination of technical and academic subjects, it can be a positive force. Career pathways can be an excellent

approach to look at different ways academic work is connected to real life experiences. Many students are hungry for this. However, if School to Work is just another form of tracking, reducing rigor and course opportunities for students, then it will be a serious educational mistake.

ACCESS: Affirmative action has been repealed by the University of California Board of Regents, and the California State University system is making strong comments about eliminating remedial coursework for CSU students. What encouragement or advice do you have for AVID sites that might see both of these situations as potentially damaging for disadvantaged students?

HART: Obviously, there are concerns about the damages these changes might create. But I don't believe it will necessarily be as bad as some people are predicting. When you have a crisis like this, there are sometimes opportunities that did not exist before. For example, the Chancellor at UC Berkeley, Dr. Chang-Lin Tien, recently said that his campus will now be more involved with Bay Area disadvantaged students. Admissions officers, who remain sympathetic to diversity, have many means at their disposal to assist disadvantaged students. Don't underestimate their resourcefulness. Regarding CSU remediation policies, I don't believe it is unreasonable to ask students who are in the top one-third of their graduating class to have minimal skills in both writing and mathematics. We need to do a better job at diagnosing problems earlier and then expand programs like

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summer school and AVID so that students can gain the necessary help they need.

ACCESS: As the director of the Institute for Education Reform, you see many different educational reform efforts. What has led you to support AVID's dissemination on a broader scale?

HART: I have seen a number of programs that people are enthusiastic about. But as a policy maker I learned that some degree of skepticism is necessary. The criteria I use in supporting a program like AVID is that, number one, it has clear objectives—for example, getting more students into college and documenting that success. Research by Hugh Mehan (University of California, San Diego) and others shows this. AVID also has some other facets that are important. It has been around for a while, unlike some programs that have a first blush of success and fade. AVID is not a fad and is affecting many schools. Also noteworthy about AVID is the fact that—unlike some other reform efforts—it's a bottom-up program developed by a classroom teacher, not handed down from the university level or state level.

ACCESS: How would you like to see AVID evolve in its next 15 years?

HART: I'm not an expert but I would like to see it expanded. As AVID grows, however, I'd be concerned about quality control. Any program that rapidly expands must be certain that its heart and soul remains intact. I would hope that the AVID model will focus on the classroom teacher along with the counselor and principal. A major challenge is more actively involving regular subject area teachers and figuring out ways that AVID methods can be infused throughout the school.

It's easy to say but difficult to carry out.

ACCESS: Some researchers have commented that AVID is a conservative program because it works within the existing system. How, then, does it fit in with other restructuring movements?

HART: Actually, it is one of AVID's strengths that it works within the system. Too often, new programs are not connected to reality. What separates AVID is that it has a specific instructional focus. Other reform efforts deal with governance issues such as how will decisions be made and who will make the decisions but don't change instructional practices. I find it refreshing that AVID's focus remains in the classroom. Finally, my experience with reform is that it is more difficult at the secondary level, which is much more bureaucratic and discipline oriented. Elementary teachers, as a rule, are more open to innovations. AVID is special because it allows secondary teachers to be part of reform.

ACCESS: What do you believe is required to change the way an experienced teacher works with an increasingly diverse student population?

HART: First and foremost, teachers need more tools to reach out to the diversity they deal with. They realize that traditional ways don't always work. Having thoughtful staff development programs is important. We know that one-shot workshops rarely work. Staff development must be ongoing and collegial. Outside experts are OK initially, but to have a powerful impact one must involve staff in a hands-on fashion. A strength of AVID is that there is no watered-down curriculum and expectations are high. Teachers often enter the classroom with high expectations

but student failure takes its toll on teachers.

ACCESS: Do you believe the various proposals being circulated for a high school 'exit exam' might result in greater K-12 accountability for students graduating prepared to enter systems such as the California State University?

HART: I think so. We need to focus more on outcomes than on seat time. We probably won't ever do away with seat time and Carnegie Units, but I commend California's State Superintendent Delaine Eastin for her recent proposals. It is a complex, controversial undertaking to develop standards for all graduates. A good place to begin is third grade, with a focus on reading. At the same time, we should establish a set of entrance criteria for those students planning on attending the CSU and UC systems. But to try to put in place such standards overnight, all at once, is simplistic and would not be fair to students about to graduate from high school.

ACCESS: As chair of the California Senate Education Committee, you worked to pass legislation mandating proficiency tests for high school graduates, as well as proficiency tests to certify new teachers. How do you see assessment and accountability evolving for teachers and students in the near future?

HART: For students, state and national proficiency exams may be on the horizon, and that demands a higher level of academic performance than existing proficiency requirements. As for teachers, individual certification of classroom performance rather than exclusive reliance upon paper and pencil tests such as CBEST (required for a teaching credential in California) is a real possibility.