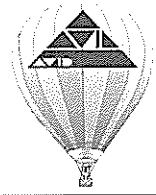


ACCESS



Staying Awake Through a Revolution: The Goal of AVID Site Teams

by Mary Catherine Swanson, AVID Founder and Director

Most of us have read Washington Irving's story "Rip Van Winkle." What we usually remember from the story is that Van Winkle slept twenty years; however, another message in the story is often overlooked. A sign above the Inn in the little town on the Hudson where Van Winkle goes up into the mountains for his long sleep has the picture of George the Third of England. When Van Winkle comes down from the mountains, the sign above the Inn has a picture of George Washington, the first President of the United States. Van Winkle had not merely slept for twenty years, he had slept through a revolution, a revolution that would change the course of history. One of the great liabilities

of history is that all too often we find ourselves amid great periods of change, yet we fail to recognize the change and we maintain our former ways of doing things. A revolution is taking place in America today, and schools are in the middle of it. The challenge facing every educator is to stay awake through this revolution.

The needs of today's students are vastly different from the needs of students twenty years ago, yet we must prepare students for postsecondary standards which have not changed appreciably in the past twenty years. Today's teaching is extraordinarily demanding of teachers' expertise, energy, and enthusiasm, yet the most common scenario remains one in which teachers labor on

their own to decide what instruction works best, what standard of student work is good enough, and what additional knowledge, skill, or insights would best serve them and their students. Teachers find themselves struggling against hectic paces, splintered schedules, and fragmented tasks, compounded by physical isolation.

It is obvious that today's teachers need to collaborate with one another in order to focus on best practices rather than to teach in the traditional isolated classrooms and schedules of twenty years ago. The need for ongoing learning, problem-solving, collaboration, and experimenta-

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Dr. Jeannie Oakes: Focusing on Equality and Opportunity for All Students

The Fall, 1997 Access Interview

After 20 years of researching and writing about the inequities faced by students attempting to navigate curriculum tracks and overcome the effects of ability grouping, Dr. Jeannie Oakes still remembers her initial recognition that grouping students based on perceived abilities had a negative

impact on them and on her own ability to function well as a teacher.

"In my first year as a teacher," recalls Oakes, who taught English for seven years, "I was teaching in a tracked middle school. I got an honors class, a basic class, and a regular class. I still have this

vivid memory of the first day of teaching, when my 6th period, basic class came in. They looked at each other and said, 'Oh, this is the dumb class.' As the year went on, I noticed how difficult it was for me to be an effective teacher in the basic class and how easy it

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was in the honors class. I just started asking questions."

The questions have continued, as have her numerous research studies, books, monographs, and articles focusing on both elementary and secondary policies and practices, particularly as they relate to low-income and minority students. Her work on John Goodlad's **Study of Schooling** allowed her to focus on nationwide data regarding both elementary and secondary students. Oakes also conducted **Multiplying Inequalities**, a major study for the National Science Foundation that examined teacher quality, use of resources, and instructional opportunities in math and science for different groups of students nationally. She recently completed **Beyond the Technicalities of School Reform**, a study of ten detracking schools that focused on the cultural and political factors impacting reform efforts.

As the assistant dean and director of Center X ("Where Research and Practice Intersect for Urban School Professionals") of the graduate school of education at UCLA, Oakes is responsible for 90 staff members and a group of nearly 200 student teachers. Still, she finds the time to work on her newest book, **Becoming Good American Schools—The Struggle for Virtue and Freedom in Middle School Reform** (Jossey/Bass), which is due out in the spring of 1998. Oakes also lends her expertise to court cases regarding educational inequities, and has testified in California, Illinois, and Delaware.

"I'm proud of the role I've played on behalf of plaintiffs in school desegregation cases," she says. "What these cases are about

is how a tracking system resegregates schools that were supposedly desegregated."

Oakes has been honored by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Educational Press Association, and the American Vocational Association, among others, and has been a senior social scientist and consultant for the RAND Corporation. Her husband, Martin Lipton, is a high school English teacher. They have four children, including a daughter who just began teaching kindergarten, another daughter who is a psychology professor, a son who is a playwright, and a son who is a graduate student in American Literature.

As a graduate student at UCLA, Oakes was mentored by John Goodlad, the noted author of such works as **Teachers for Our Nation's Schools**.

"He taught me how to pursue questions about schooling regularities and to look at them in a systematic way," recalls Oakes. "More importantly, he taught me that the questions about education are more than scientific, that they are moral questions as well."

Recently, Oakes answered questions for ACCESS on topics including detracking, teacher collaboration, data collection, and AVID's place in school reform.

ACCESS: As you look back at your early research, how has your thinking changed?

OAKES: I have a better appreciation for the complexity of the tracking issue. It is as much about the norms and politics of a school as it is about teaching and organization. I think Mary Catherine Swanson's experience in AVID is telling and exemplary in this regard. She went into this as an innocent, just as other educators who want to provide a better experience for students. They run into strongly held val-

ues about competition and find themselves bumping into racial and social class fears. Typically, teachers and administrators are not prepared for this. Increasingly, as I've moved my work into the normative and political issues, I've become convinced that unraveling the propensity to sort and select students is more about politics and norms than about organization.

ACCESS: Have you seen any tracking systems that you could support?

OAKES: No. I don't believe that you can do ability grouping and tracking well. Human beings are very good at acting sensibly within various types of structures. Inevitably, once you track, kids who aren't seen as smart get far less. With tracking, it's sort of an 'If you build it, they will come' situation. Remarkably, as soon as a school develops a low-ability class, it will fill with 30 kids.

ACCESS: Obviously, you've gathered a lot of research that supports detracking. What is some of the evidence?

OAKES: True, I've done a lot of studies, but I've also relied on other researchers, like Bob Slavin (from Johns Hopkins University). The most powerful research I've done was in the desegregation cases, where I've been able to look at all the kids in a school system. One of the most striking things is that when you look at their progress over time, at least two or three years, you find kids who scored the same at one point in time. But when one student was placed in the higher track and one in the lower track, their scores moved apart over time. This was true of students who were high achievers at one time and who were placed in lower tracks. We also found even very low achievers who were placed in higher

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tracks did better, and this was true for kids in the middle as well.

ACCESS: One observation you have shared from your research is the benefit of increased collaboration at the sites you studied. Working together with a focus on achievement is important to AVID site teams. How can they use data more effectively to collaborate?

OAKES: I think data has proven powerful in lots of restructuring schools. A lot of teachers think they know what's going on at their school, but they often don't have the real information. At one school in our recent study, they were trying to decipher why, when they looked at the range of their scores, they found an enormous overlap from track to track. When people look at data like this, they start to question as they never have before. Typically, when teams look at data disaggregated by race, they are surprised. Above all, having data about your own school is infinitely more interesting than national data.

ACCESS: How does AVID fit into the detracking movement?

OAKES: From my perspective, AVID is a fantastic strategy for dismantling the belief system that keeps tracking in place. It takes children who are not considered college material and proves that, if you treat them differently by altering their circumstances, they become college material. If we can do it with a handful of kids—those in AVID—this tells us we should be able to do it with nearly all students.

ACCESS: What do you see occurring in AVID that can inform the work of schools and districts nationwide?

OAKES: I think there are several things. One, probably the most obvious, is the use of time and staffing in very creative ways to provide students additional time to master the curriculum. It seems so obvious, but it's also revolutionary. The notion or typical expectation is that these kids are so many years behind others in college-prep that they can't catch up. What AVID says is that maybe they're only 50 minutes a day behind. Also, there are things that middle and upper class students know from home that for other students can be shared and talked about in the AVID class—what Mary Catherine calls 'the hidden curriculum.' This includes how to make sense out of the messages you get at school. The idea is that these things can be taught, and AVID has put them into effect very systematically. The most powerful lesson for schools is that lower track students can be placed into higher track classes—and succeed.

ACCESS: How do you know when a teacher, a school, or a district is being successful?

OAKES: The only way I've ever made that judgment is to be in a place for three or four days, talking to kids, teachers, parents, discussing their work. In one sense, it's intangible, but on the other hand—and I've written about this frequently—you get a sense of whose children these are. I look at three key questions: First, what opportunities do schools provide for students to learn, including the teachers, the structures, etc.? Secondly, is this a place where people expect that kids can learn and then do everything possible to make that happen? Finally, are there working conditions for teachers such that they feel powerful?

ACCESS: Your work, as well as that of Anne Wheelock, author of *Crossing the Tracks*, talks of 'releasing intelligence rather than quantifying it.' How do you see AVID fitting into this philosophy?

OAKES: I think the kids who are lucky enough to be in AVID have exactly that experience—having their intelligence released. You throw away the typical indicators such as achievement test scores and operate on the basis that all kids have potential and then AVID places them in a structure with adults that allows them to blossom.

ACCESS: It is generally acknowledged that teaching today is a more complex undertaking than it was, say, 20 years ago. How do you view this notion?

OAKES: I often wonder that perhaps we just have a greater appreciation now for the complexity of the task. I do believe that ability grouping complicates the job, and it amazes me that some people remain convinced that they can offer 30 children the same set of experiences, the same assessment and curriculum, and that they have dealt appropriately with the variations among students. I don't think that teachers in a setting like AVID have the slightest expectation that there won't be variations in student needs. I've often said that one of the advantages of detracking is that it can leverage better teaching. You're forced to recognize the differences in learning.

ACCESS: How does detracking mesh with what some educators and policymakers are calling 'back to basics'?

OAKES: I'm never exactly sure what they mean by that. I will say that detracking doesn't

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work well if you're trying to deliver a highly sequenced, skill-based curriculum. However, if people talk about basic skills as 20th century workforce competencies, then detracking works well for that.

ACCESS: When a school drops its number of tracks from four or five down to two, how can a support structure like AVID play a role in improving student performance?

OAKES: Many innovative schools do use structures that have some of the components of AVID, to help build into the organization the idea that some students need more time and technical support, and, as long as it's not remedial, that's a good approach. The AVID model has proven helpful in expanding the

structure of schools. We've got this lock-step time schedule that AVID helps expand with tutorials and collaborative grouping.

ACCESS: Some researchers have admonished AVID to export principles, not specific practices. Yet other studies have concluded that reform efforts do better with more explicit structures and techniques such as the AVID Essentials and curriculum-based approach. Your thoughts on this debate?

OAKES: I agree that it's really the principles that matter. In the end, only locally relevant enactments will endure. Yet I also agree with researchers such as Slavin that ill-defined principles cannot penetrate the structure of schools. From my point of view, we must spend more time formulating a mutual-adaptation process such as described by

Milbrey McLaughlin of Stanford. There are some good examples of how educators have crafted a reform effort to fit local needs. I found some examples among the ten schools I recently studied. But mutual adaptation needs to proceed very carefully, to preserve the goals of equity in any reform.

ACCESS: What works are on the Jeannie Oakes required reading list?

OAKES: John Dewey's Democracy in Education, along with Paolo Freire's The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and Cornell West's Race Matters. These works converge in that they all prompt human beings to engage in serious discussions about schooling.

For additional information regarding Dr. Oakes' work, please see her bibliography, which is posted on AVID's Website.



ABOUT THE AVID CENTER

In 1996, the AVID Center was formally established to disseminate the program outside of San Diego County. As a non-profit educational group, the AVID Center and its associates develop the AVID curriculum, create staff development modules, and support the work of regional and district directors in 13 states and 11 foreign countries.

AVID Center managers include:

Mary Catherine Swanson, AVID Founder and Director

Mary Catherine taught high school English for 20 years before she moved to the San Diego County Office of Education. During that time she was instrumental in developing numerous award-winning language arts programs. In 1980 she developed AVID, a secondary school program which prepares under-achieving students for four-year college entry. More than 93% of AVID students enroll in college.

Among the awards and recognition Mary Catherine has

received are the A+ Award for Reaching the Goals of America 2000 from the U.S. Department of Education, EXCEL Award for Excellence in Teaching, Salute to Excellence from the American Association for Higher Education, and Headliner of the Year from the San Diego Press Club.

She is listed in *Who's Who in America* and was the commencement speaker at San Diego State University in 1992. She is the only public school teacher ever to have won the \$50,000 award for Pioneering Achievement in Education from the Charles A. Dana Foundation in New York. In presenting that award the

Foundation cited her for "heeding the teacher's calling at the highest level of professional dedication in developing AVID, an imaginative restructuring of the school day that has given thousands of students the skills, support and guidance that they need to fulfill their potential—far too tragically overlooked—to prepare for a college education."

She has been married for 31 years and is the mother of Tom Swanson, a graduate of Stanford University who has just completed his first year of high school teaching at Monta Vista High School in Cupertino, Cali-

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