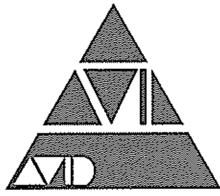
ADVANCEMENT VIA INDIVIDUAL DETERMINATION



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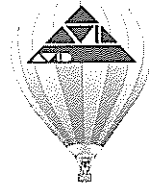

Winter 1997

# AVID and School Reform: Access and Advocacy

by Mary Catherine Swanson, AVID Founder and Director

During the past year, educational publications have decried school reform efforts as less than resounding successes, while politicians continue to lambaste public schools as failures. The truth is that schools mirror society, and society has changed since most of us who are teaching school went to school. In the 50's and 60's most homes were comprised of two parents, often with a mother at home rather than at work outside the home. Most students in the public schools were fortunate to have English as their first language, fewer students lived in poverty, and it was easier to enter college if one had merely the minimum requirements than it was to get a job at a fast food restaurant. Drugs were still most accessible in the big cities, rather than in the suburbs and rural areas.

Times have changed. Today families struggle to stay together, children live amid more chaos, and consequently educating students is more difficult than ever before. Nevertheless, what allows students to be successful within school systems is not difficult to identify:

- Students must feel they belong in school, that it is a good place to be where adults care about their well-being, and
- Students must be given rigorous curriculum; they cannot learn what they are never exposed to.

If we think back to our days in school, we will remember that communities supported the schools and that we thought we could do almost anything. I cannot begin to enumerate all the things we all participated in school—honor societies, sports, debating, theatrical productions, musical groups, clubs, school offices, cheer leading, and community charitable events, to name a few. What a shock it was when I arrived at U.C. Berkeley with 27,000 students who had all done what I had done, plus more. I wasn't so special after all, but by that time it didn't matter, because I had the confidence that I could tackle anything and conquer it, that I had the wherewithal to do things, and when I returned home, the family, community, and school would care about what I had done.

*Continued on page 2*

# Dr. Phillip C. Schlechty: Speaking the Language of School Reform

*The Winter 1997 ACCESS Interview*

When he looks at students, Dr. Phillip C. Schlechty sees "customers." In teachers, he hopes to find "leaders and inventors." And in his work with principals and superintentents, he attempts to develop the mentality of **executive officers**, individuals who can effectively "lead the leaders."

This is the type of thinking that has made Schlechty a profound influence on many current school reform efforts. In fact, he and his staff of 20 at the Center for Leadership in School Reform, located in Louisville, Kentucky, provide leadership, ideas, and support for school districts in nearly every state in the U.S. as well as many Canadian school districts, advising teachers, principals, superintendents, and school boards on how to reinvent schools.

A popular keynote speaker, Schlechty is also a prolific writer who has published over 100 articles and five books in since he began studying the process of restructuring schools and managing and leading school change almost 30 years ago. His newest book, **Inventing Better Schools,** will be

*Continued on page 4*

*Dr. Schlechty*
*Continued from page 4*
beginning to understand. Such changes create expectations and make new demands, demands that existing institutions must respond to or they will die.

ACCESS: You say in your new book that we must invent a new system, providing 'an elite education for nearly every child?' What do you mean by 'elite', and why is it important to take this approach?

SCHLECHTY: By 'elite' I mean persons who have access to resources or who possess attributes that are relatively scarce and highly valued. In the past, high quality academic education was reserved for the children of the social, economic, and political elites. Thus, academic elites tended to come from the upper classes. Vocational education and general education were reserved for the children of the working classes. Today, high quality academic education is needed for all children. Today, academic education is vocational education as well, for most vocations now require one to master the kinds of skills that one must master to succeed academically.

ACCESS: You make the point that reform efforts have often focused on the work of adults as opposed to that of students. What are some of the first steps that schools can take to organize themselves around the work of students?

SCHLECHTY: The first step is to embrace two understandings. First, the work schools provide students is the product of the schools. Second, students are the customers of the school, they are not products.

Given these understandings, we should ask, 'What would schools look like if they were organized around students and the work we want students to do?' and, based on the answers provided, we would get about the business of redesigning our schools.

ACCESS: If, as you write in your book, the application of knowledge is key, how do teachers get students to produce 'knowledge work,' as you call it?

SCHLECHTY: All intellectual products (for example, essays, interview questions and media productions) are the result of knowledge work. Manual work has to do with focusing muscle and brawn on the production of some desired outcome or product. Knowledge work has to do with focusing the mind on the production of some desired outcome or product.

We might begin by ensuring that all the work students do is somehow connected with some product or result about which students care and from which they can derive some sense of pride and accomplishment.

ACCESS: You frequently refer to teachers as inventors who must design engaging and compelling work. How will this work look different from what we do now?

SCHLECHTY: Among other things, the work will be product-focused. What Theodore Sizer refers to as 'exhibitions' would be commonplace. There would be clear product standards, and the students would understand and be committed to these standards (rubrics would be commonplace). Students would be challenged to the point of failure, but they would not be punished for failing. Rather, they would be encouraged to try again and would be provided the time and support to make the next try more successful.

ACCESS: In AVID we like to think that we adhere to your notion of students as "primary customers" and teachers as inventors and leaders. What type of training is required for these metaphors to take hold in a practical way?

SCHLECHTY: Most of the training needed is conceptual in nature. Teachers already have the skills they need to do the job; what is needed are ideas, concepts and processes that focus these skills on improving the work given to students rather than on improving the students themselves. When teachers come to understand the difference between working on students and working on the work they give to students, teachers begin to develop their own training and their own support systems.

ACCESS: How does the preparation for college—of paramount importance in the AVID world—fit into your notion of schools as a 'customer-driven' enterprise?

SCHLECHTY: Historically, colleges and universities have set the academic standards for the public schools. The entrance standards of colleges, rather than the exit standards of the public schools, were the real academic standards that drove students. Unfortunately, in the past it was assumed that only the elite could meet these standards. AVID begins with the assumption that most students can meet these elite standards if the needs of the students are met first. My idea of the student as customer—and the customer-focused school—proceeds from the same set of assumptions.

ACCESS: Engagement of students 'without coercion' is another philosophical point you make in your new book. What are the typical coercions and how do we move beyond these?

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*Dr. Schlechty*
*Continued from page 1*
published in February of 1997. He sees it as a companion piece to his previously published **Schools for the 21st Century.**

"The new book was written for the group I call the reformers—teachers, principals, parents, superintendents, and policy makers," says Schlechty, who has M.A. and PhD degrees from Ohio State University and who has been a professor of education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "The first book says, 'Here's what needs to be done, ' and the second book says, 'Here's how to do it.'"

Readers of Schlechty's books and articles are well aware of his penchant for communicating metaphorically about schools and the change process. In a well known article, for example, he used the terms "trailblazers, pioneers, and settlers," among others, to represent roles assumed by individuals who are involved in significant educational change. As far back as the early 1960's, in fact, Schlechty was noting the importance of metaphors in his sociological studies.

"I belive that metaphorical thinking is important," he says, "because the metaphors imbedded in our culture impact the way we see the world. Currently, for example, if you look closely at newspapers, magazines, and even our every day speech, youcan see the influence of computers. When we talk about making personal contacts, we say 'networking,' and when we have a mental lapse, we've 'crashed.'

Schlechty's own use of language and his love of storytelling was influenced by his upbringing, which was rural, and by religious leaders in his community.

"In my environment," he says, "storytelling was important. It's what people spent the long winters doing. And our ministers used parables. It's become my natural bent."

While several noted sociologists influenced Schlecty's work, the educator who set him on the path resulting in the Center for Leadership for School Reform, and influenced his many books and articles, was Jay Robinson, formerly the superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

"I went to work for him as a special assistant on a number of projects in the 1970's," recalls Schlechty, whose honors include commendations from the American Federation of Teachers and the American Educational Research Association. "He was a leader who knew how to create conditions so that other people could lead as well."

In both his speeches and in his writing, Schlechty has pointed out that schools are doing better than ever at what they were designed to do, but he has also noted that the design is now hopelessly out of date. Recently, he took time to answer some questions for ACCESS on this and other subjects.

ACCESS: The terms 'educational reform' and 'restructuring' are often used synonymously. Can you distinguish between true educational reform and restructuring?

SCHLECHTY: Restructuring has to do with altering systems of rules, roles, and relationships that govern behavior in schools—or for that matter, any other organization. Educational reform that involves changing rules, roles, and relationships is restructuring <u>and</u> reform. Some kinds of reform, (for example, changing the sequence in which subjects are taught) do not, in my view, involve restructuring.

ACCESS: If, as you have observed, schools are really doing better than ever at what they were designed to do, can you give some examples of their improved performance and also note why we still need to make major changes?

SCHLECHTY: A simple illustration is the drop-out rate. Prior to the 1950's there never was a time when the drop-out rate was less than 50 percent. Now the drop-out rate is between 15 and 20 percent. In 1918 there were so many Americans who were literally illiterate (they could not read English) that the Army developed a special test to accommodate illiterates. Now 99 percent of all Americans can read.

Unfortunately, too many Americans are functionally illiterate—that is, they can read but they do not read well enough to be able to handle technical manuals or to critically analyze reports.

I have written quite extensively on why reform is needed. I will summarize what I have said by a simple assertion: in a world where information has become a form of currency, literal literacy is not enough. Functional literacy is what is required, and too many Americans are not functionally literate and too many are culturally illiterate, as well. What was once elite education must become common education.

ACCESS: Why are the public's expectations of schools increasing at such a rapid rate, outpacing schools' ability to satisfy our constituents?

SCHLECHTY: The rate of change has accelerated over the past 50 years. The world I was born into in 1937 was more like the world my great grandfather was born into in 1837 than it is like the world I live in today. Electronic communication, television, and computers manifested the consequences of which we are only now

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*Smith*
*Continued from page 5*

SCHLECHTY: Coercion involves the inflicting of physical or psychological pain, denial of access, the limitation of mobility and similar strategies. When students are alienated from both the means and the ends of schooling, as many are, then coercion becomes the primary means by which compliance is gained. If we are to move away from coercion, we must find ways to increase student commitment to the means and ends of schooling or change the means and ends of schooling in ways that are more appealing to the students.

I agree with Eric Smith, superintendent of the Charlotte-Mecklenberg School System, when he says '...increased [student] expectations without support is empty rhetoric.'

ACCESS: Capacity-building is a fundamental part of the assistance your CLSR group provides for schools and districts as they develop goals. How is this process different from the more traditional goal-setting done by school districts?

SCHLECHTY: Setting goals and developing the capacity to achieve those goals are two different things. A football coach may have the goal of winning more games than are lost, but to achieve this goal he or she must work on the capacity of the players to block, tackle, pass, run, punt and play as a team. Similarly, to have a goal of increasing parent involvement requires schools to develop the capacity to function as inviting environments, to ensure clear communication, and to learn to accept criticism as well as support.

ACCESS: CLSR proposes ten fundamental capacities for improvement, based on critical questions. Are there some key capacities that must be addressed first?

SCHLECHTY: Yes. The first thing that must happen is that school districts must develop the capacity to educate the public—as well as those who work in schools— regarding the need to change and what the consequences of the failure of change is likely to be. Change will not occur until teachers and administrators see the need for change as an urgent matter. A sense of urgency does not simply happen. Urgency must be developed through careful education.

Once a sense of urgency is created, schools must have leaders who understand how to lead serious change efforts and they must have the capacity to sustain that change, even when budgets are cut and criticism is widespread.

ACCESS: AVID has been studied from a sociological standpoint in a number of books and articles, examining how it changes the way in which students and their families interact with the school system and with other students. From your vantage point as a sociologist, why is it important that students have a different and more meaningful relationship with the system and each other?

SCHLECHTY: Too many students are disengaged from school. Without engagement nothing else can happen. Students can be coerced into attending school and they can be coerced into compliance. However, schools need the attention and the commitment of students rather than their attendance and compliance. Attention and commitment must be earned.

# The Meaning of AVID: Reflections from California's Statewide Director

by Dr. Judith Lookabill

On July 1, I officially joined the AVID family as the first California AVID statewide director. Funded through the California Department of Education, the AVID Expansion initiative authorized the establishment of the statewide director position and eight AVID county regions across the state. The primary charge to the statewide director is to provide leadership, support and linkage from the AVID Center to each of these eight regions and their regional directors. It involves traveling the state, visiting county programs, local AVID classrooms and connecting with district and county leaders. Without a doubt, however, of all the responsibilities that fall to me as the AVID statewide director, AVID classroom visits are far and above the most significant and invigorating.

Recently, I found myself in an AVID classroom of juniors and seniors in a large, multicultural high school in San Jose. The students were preparing for finals and engaged in some very intense work. The AVID coordinator introduced me and explained my visit as part of the AVID statewide effort to connect with, link and support AVID programs across

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