



# ACCESS



## AVID: Tackling the Achievement Gap

Mary Catherine Swanson  
AVID Founder and Executive Director

America has just survived another hotly contested political season featuring education as the focal point. Politicians reveled in promises to set national, state, and local standards for students and to hold public schools accountable for student results. America believes that its public schools are failing, although when those who have children enrolled in public schools are queried if their child's school is performing well, seventy-four percent respond in the affirmative.

What is clear is that we are educating many of our students well as evidenced by the ever rising achievement among White and Asian students with the concomitant increase in admission requirements among our nation's

colleges. In order to enter the University of California at Berkeley in the fall of 1998, the average student had eighteen semester credits in honors and Advanced Placement courses and an SAT score of 1325.<sup>1</sup>

The truth is that the current crisis in education is more than political rhetoric. With the advent of anti-affirmative action legislation on the rise and the increase in university admission standards, certain groups of students are excluded from our nation's most prestigious colleges and universities. The gap in achievement among Whites and Asians and African Americans and Latinos is growing. Most notable is the huge gap in SAT scores (generally one standard deviation or more)

between the scores of African Americans/Latinos (both Mexican American and Puerto Rican) and Whites/Asians. Three times as many White and Asian students score at or above 500 on the math section of the SAT as do African Americans, and Latino students are only half as likely to score in this range as Whites and Asians.<sup>2</sup>

Minority admissions and enrollment are dropping sharply in both California and Texas post secondary institutions. The University of California 1998 entering freshman class registered 66% fewer African Americans and 53% fewer Latinos than in 1997 at the flagship Berkeley campus. UCLA had a drop of 43% for African Americans, and 33% for Latinos. For the two ma-

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## Gene I. Maeroff: Altered Destinies

What are the conditions necessary for all children, and especially poor children, to achieve success in school? How can communities and schools work together to create environments that foster emotional and academic well-being? In his most recent book, *Altered Destinies* (St. Martin's Press, 1998), Gene I. Maeroff, formerly the national education correspondent for the New York Times, explores these

and other questions regarding student achievement. After studying numerous schools systems and educational programs in his research for *Altered Destinies*, Maeroff, currently Director of the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at Teachers College, Columbia University, has developed the theory that, to enrich the educational experience of children in need, schools and communities must provide a sup-

port system that stresses four areas: a sense of connectedness, a sense of well-being, a sense of academic initiative, and a sense of knowing. He offers examples of programs throughout the U.S., including AVID, that build these senses for young people and, by doing so, increase the likelihood that they will succeed in school and look forward to a meaningful future.

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## Maeroff

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Maeroff's many previous books include *Team Building for School Change*; *The School Smart Parent*; *The Empowerment of Teachers: Overcoming the Crisis of Confidence*; *Don't Blame the Kids: The Trouble With America's Public Schools*, as well as numerous articles. In his current work with The Hechinger Institute, which he opened in 1997, Maeroff oversees seminars for journalists and educators, featuring nationally recognized presenters from both fields. To promote excellence in journalistic coverage of education, The Hechinger Institute invites working journalists and educators from throughout the U.S. to examine topics such as the condition of mathematics and science education, media relations for school superintendents, and the condition of higher education.

A featured speaker at AVID Summer Institutes, Mr. Maeroff was previously interviewed for **ACCESS** in the spring of 1995, when he discussed the importance of team building to improve student learning.

With *Altered Destinies*, Maeroff makes a strong case that high achievement for all students is possible, but not without key supporting elements. Recently, during a visit to San Diego, he took part in a panel discussion with AVID teachers and students, as well as with AVID's Founder and Director, Mary Catherine Swanson. The following questions and answers have been excerpted from his discussion.

**ACCESS:** In the introduction to your book *Altered Destinies*, you note that democracy cannot be fully realized if our students emerge from schools unprepared to participate in a meaningful life. Isn't this emphasis on schools

providing 'meaning' a slightly untraditional view of education's role?

**MAEROFF:** I think that schools have to play a role in helping students obtain a place in the mainstream of society. It has to be part of what schools can contribute. And that has to mean that at the end of the process students are not outsiders, they are not disenfranchised, and they are not alienated. Furthermore, when we

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talk about meaningful life and meaningful outcomes from schools, I think schools have to play a role in helping young people become participating members of a democratic society because democracy is really based on that.

**ACCESS:** The sociologist Coleman described social capital as what students bring to school, based on their experience with their families and in their neighborhoods. How do you see AVID influencing their social capital?

**MAEROFF:** When James Coleman, who died just a few years ago, wrote about what he called social capital, he was talking about networks, norms, values, and trust relationships. And in fact, he did say this is part of what students bring with them to school that helps them to be successful. In *Altered Destinies*, I have tried to make the case that because of various obstacles, including economic circumstances, some students just don't get social capital in their home settings. And it is possible for schools to make up for that. From what I've seen in AVID and other programs that I wrote about, these programs do contribute to the social capital

of young people, which in turn, leads to success.

**ACCESS:** So it's possible for students to come with a certain amount of social capital and then exit it with a tremendous amount more?

**MAEROFF:** Yes, I think there has to be an add-on. I think the goal here has to be for the schools to create a situation that more or less equates what comes automatically in the lives of students who have greater advantages in their home lives. Studies have found a disconnect between the aspirations of some students who have disadvantaged backgrounds. They say, "I want to go to a college; I want to be a doctor or a lawyer," but when it comes to follow-through, they don't necessarily have the social capital, the experience within their own families and their own surroundings to be able to take the next step. But certain programs like AVID can give them help to close that circle.

**ACCESS:** You describe four senses that are necessary for student success—connectedness, well-being, knowing, and academic initiative. Which of these is the most lacking in the U.S and how can we best address it? Which of these does AVID best address?

**MAEROFF:** Perhaps the sense most lacking and the one I think AVID develops is the sense of academic initiative. When I talk about academic initiative what I have in mind are all of the underpinnings that allow one to function successfully as a student. That involves habits and attitudes more than anything else. And I think if you were to talk to young people from AVID you would find that the greatest impact that AVID has had on them is academic initiative, in terms of

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having an impact on their attitudes and habits. So I would say that's what's missing often among many students. One part of it among disadvantaged students, and worst of all, for black males, is a feeling that taking school seriously is betraying the norms. AVID can help overcome this, as can other programs that I've written about in the book.

**ACCESS:** The building of social capital, including vital linkages and networks for students, seems to occur in some varied settings you describe in *Altered Destinies*. What were key factors no matter what the location or the program?

**MAEROFF:** Above all else, the students need concerned and dedicated adults. You need adults who can implement the program and who really care about the students. Some of the adults were charismatic, and you start wondering, is it possible to carry out these programs without the charisma? I address this issue in the conclusion to the book. And, secondly, attention to students' attitudes is vital. I think habits are harder to impinge upon than attitudes because habits of the mind take more work. But that can follow after changing attitudes. So, I would say those are some of the commonalities among different kinds of programs.

**ACCESS:** One of the things that you talk about in your book is the notion of school, and you describe the community schools as part of the another era. In what ways does AVID embrace some of these concepts that you discuss in connection with community schools?

**MAEROFF:** In a way, you can look at any particular AVID classroom as a community in its own

right. It is a kind of community in microcosm. What is important about it, going back to what Mary Catherine has mentioned, is that AVID creates a subculture in which academic achievement is an acceptable goal. You may have a larger setting in the larger school that doesn't buy into the idea of achievement and doesn't honor achievement and hard work in school. One way to fight that is to create a subculture in which achievement is honored. As another example, in Los Ange-

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les, the Neighborhood Academic Initiative, operating out of the University of Southern California and some secondary schools in south central L.A., tries to do the same thing. The kids throughout the school may not buy into achievement, but those participating in the program come onto the campus in the morning to take classes and go back to the high school in the afternoon. Then, they go back to the campus for tutoring and go back to the campus on Saturday for more experiences with their parents or care givers. So, again, what we are talking about is a subculture, and one would hope that the subculture ultimately could permeate the larger setting. I saw some examples of that with aspects of AVID. What's important is that students don't have to give up on school. They are among a smaller group of students and teachers — those associated with AVID — who care intensely. You start with them. And you hope that this good virus will spread throughout the school.

**ACCESS:** You draw some distinctions between how some families feel they are treated by schools and the experience of others. How has this become such a serious problem?

**MAEROFF:** I think you would find, at least I did in writing my book, that among lower income families there is not the same kind of connection to the school as among more affluent families. In some cases, people may feel intimidated, they may feel inadequate. Perhaps their language is not widely spoken at the school so they feel insecure about that. And some lower-income parents have themselves had some bad experiences with schools as students. So when you put together these various forces, you have a situation in which the children may not have the kind of reinforcement in the home that more advantaged children are more likely to have. Schools really have to strive to make a connection with the home. People associated with AVID programs have indicated how AVID tries to do that and, in fact, is able to do that.

**ACCESS:** What about the sense of well being—why is this so vital to the students?

**MAEROFF:** When you think of well being for students you think initially of physical well being — youngsters not having asthma, not suffering this or that chronic illness, not having vision impaired. Students can't function at their optimal best if physical needs are not addressed. But, emotional well being is equally important and I advocate in *Altered Destinies* that the programs concern themselves with the emotional needs of students.

**ACCESS:** You describe the sense of well being as partly a search for self-confidence. How

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did you observe AVID and other programs aiding in this search?

**MAEROFF:** AVID and other programs provide avenues for success. One of the reasons why gang members often don't try in school is because they are afraid of failure. And they are not afforded some sort of outlet such as AVID provides, so that they can, in fact, enjoy incremental success and build on that. Students need support so that then they can gain self-confidence. This contributes to emotional well being.

**ACCESS:** You had an opportunity to observe AVID programs at both Palm Middle School and Southwest High School, two of AVID's National Demonstration Schools. What role did you see tutors playing to support the sense of academic initiative?

**MAEROFF:** Tutors provide information and help students focus their inquiry. They also serve as role models. When AVID students go back as tutors, as they might at some point as college students, the students they work with can look at them and say 'These are people like me.' By their own admission, some of the tutors I met were at one time wrestling with the same problems as today's students. Now, they are on the way to academic degrees. They are role models and this is very important for some kids who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. They might not know any college graduates other than their teachers. All of a sudden, inserted into their lives are these tutors who aren't many years older than they are. The tutors have grown up in fairly similar circumstances and that speaks much louder than anything that their AVID teachers can possibly say to the students.

**ACCESS:** How can the AVID students you've met play a key role in influencing the senses you describe in *Altered Destinies*?

**MAEROFF:** Ideally, by their very existence. They represent to the entire school and everybody who works in the school something that the school should be striving for, for all students, whether or not they are in AVID. Parts of the AVID program become mimicked in the larger school and that's to the benefit of the school. These young people in AVID become key students for teachers to have in their classes. They can lift the quality of the entire class. The school should learn from this example and realize these kinds of needs have to be addressed for all students.

**ACCESS:** As you have toured the country discussing your book, what reactions have you gotten from educators? From parents? What has surprised you about the way your book is perceived?

**MAEROFF:** People say to me that there is nothing surprising about what I've written. And all I can think is, if you know it then why don't you do it? There is a real problem in this country of having the will to improve. What's happening now, without change, is that hundreds of thousands of young people across this country every year reach about 18 or 19 years old with or without high school diplomas, not able to imagine what kind of future the country has for them. It's what James Conant wrote about almost 50 years ago. He called it "social dynamite," a rather powerful term. So if people say that *Altered Destinies* has nothing that is surprising, well, let's see them demonstrate that by showing the will to bring change. We have examples in AVID students of what is possible. These programs could be pulled together to create a co-

herent whole. When I hear what some students in AVID say at the end of the process, it almost brings tears to my eyes. You hear their stories and you recognize what is possible, what can be done. The challenge here is to make this happen for many more kids who need change in their lives.

**Gene Maeroff continues in his role as director of the Hechinger Institute. His book *Altered Destinies* can be ordered from the AVID catalog or via the AVID website at [www.avidcenter.org](http://www.avidcenter.org).**

### *Did You Know?*

That Department of Defense Dependents Schools (DoDDS) AVID students in Italy, Germany, and England are achieving at a higher level, increasing their enrollment in honors classes and gaining Renaissance recognition. See the AVID website "AVID News, DoDDS Newsletter" for more info. [www.avidcenter.org](http://www.avidcenter.org)

### *Did You Know?*

The Policy Analysis of California Education (PACE) group from Stanford University studied outreach programs in California and found..."When compared with the evaluations of most other college-preparation programs, the evaluations of AVID have been quite extensive. Longitudinal studies of cohorts of high school AVID students have shown strong relationships between participation in AVID and four-year college enrollment and persistence." For the detailed report, see AVID Research at [www.avidcenter.org](http://www.avidcenter.org).