



ACCESS



AVID: Tackling the Achievement Gap

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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 1325.¹

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.²

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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major campuses of the University of California, this translates into a freshman class composed of 2% African Americans and 8.6% Latinos in a state in which African Americans and Latinos combined represent almost 50% of the public school population.³

Educating well all groups of students is both economically and morally right; indeed, it is the only hope to preserve the democracy we have grown to cherish. In a country as politically and racially polarized as the United States, no single change taken in isolation could possibly usher in an era full of equality and political harmony. But if equality is at the heart of America's promise as a country, reducing the achievement gap among ethnic groups would probably do more to promote this agenda than any other strategy that could command broad political support.

In the 1960's, racial egalitarians routinely blamed achievement gaps on the combined effects of poverty, racial segregation, and inadequate funding for schools in poor communities. That analysis implied obvious solutions: raise

family income, desegregate schools, and equalize spending in schools. All those steps appeared useful, but none was the solution. According to Jencks and Phillips in the Black-White Test Score Gap,

- The number of affluent Black parents has grown substantially since the 1960's, but their children's test scores still lag far behind those of White children from equally affluent families.
- Large racial differences in reading skills persist even in desegregated schools where a school's racial mix has little effect on reading scores after sixth grade or on math scores at any age.
- The average Black child and the average White child now live in school districts that spend almost exactly the same amount per pupil.⁴

Taken as a whole, "traditional" solutions for the achievement gap do not take us very far and arguing that student assessments are culturally biased doesn't play well in the real world.

Since 1990, however, new statistical methods, new data, and a handful of genuine experiments have suggested that additional resources have, in fact, sizable effects on student achievement. Such research has brought Hugh Mehan to say that "Our data shows that AVID students are not necessarily trapped by their social circumstances. Students from the lowest income and educational levels are attaining a prestigious and economically important goal, enrollment in college. This means social environments can be rearranged at least under these circumstances, in order to facilitate educational opportunities. . ."⁵

Data reveal the core of the problem. If the SAT is a measure of high school preparation, then

there are clearly significant differences among the ethnic groups in the education they are receiving. U.S. Department of Education data indicate that underrepresented minority students take fewer rigorous college preparatory courses in high school and that their grade point averages in the courses they do take are uniformly lower than for White or Asian students.

Approaches to alleviate the achievement gap seem obvious.

Rigor is a Key

- All students, not just those from certain ethnic groups, must be challenged in rigorous curriculum. Resnick rightly tells us that "Equity and excellence, classically viewed as competing goals, must now be treated as a single aspiration."⁷

High or low expectations create self-fulfilling prophecies. All students must believe they can achieve before they will risk trying. In AVID we recruit students by telling them that they are smart but not achieving at levels which will allow them to have the opportunity to attend college. We promise them that if they will enroll in college-preparatory, rigorous curriculum and work hard, that the AVID teachers and tutors will support them in achieving. AVID teachers create risk free classroom environments in which students are required to share their understanding of course concepts both orally and in writing. Mehan tells us in his study of AVID that "the sorting practices of schools constitute the very identities of the students they touch. It is not that dumb kids are placed in slow groups or low tracks; it is that kids are made dumb by being placed into slow groups or low tracks. And as we have seen in AVID, students can

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be made smart by being placed in challenging courses when they have a system of scaffolding supporting them."⁸

Keeping students in dumbed-down curriculum through failing to provide them with the support they need to move to more rigor breeds failure. Students victimized in these systems fall further and further behind their peers, are stigmatized, and lose self-esteem and motivation, while expectations for their performance plummet.

The message that nerds will do well in school and as adults is difficult to sell to students, and doubly hard to sell when it has only recently become true. But this is exactly what AVID is able to do through what Mehan calls "academic gangs," the ultimate high school weapon, peer pressure.

Effort creates ability as opposed to the traditional assumption that native ability is the primary determinant of learning. Once students clearly understand what the academic expectations are for succeeding at levels which will allow them to be college eligible, they are able to direct their efforts at what they need to know. AVID students have the experience of studying hard to pass examinations that they know measure academic rigor, that counts for something, and for which they have been systematically prepared by teachers and tutors who themselves understand rigor.

AVID recognizes that some students need more time and support than others and that the time required by students to reach high standards should be allowed to vary. This is why AVID insists that the elective class be offered during the school day so that students may receive intensive academic intervention not just

when they choose to seek it but at the very time it is needed, as AVID teachers stay fully informed of students' daily progress. Most schools deal with failing students by having them repeat courses; however, Jimerson, Shane, et. al. find that

Research and practice now show the educational community methods for attacking the achievement gap.

"retaining students for an extra year of instruction once they fall behind does not lead to higher achievement levels" and yet this is the most common practice in our schools.⁹

Teachers Make the Difference

- In addition to rigor for all groups of students, the other most important ingredient for student success is the teacher. The Harvard Legislative Journal reports that the factors which most affect student achievement are the home and family with a 49% correlation and the qualifications of the teacher with a 43% correlation.¹⁰ While schools cannot control the homes from which children come, they can fashion the quality of teaching.

Clearly teachers must be competent in the subjects they teach, but effective teaching is more than content knowledge. AVID Center research on successful AVID schools reveals that

- AVID teachers are less satisfied with regard to their teaching than non AVID faculty. When teachers are always questioning existing practices, a desire to rectify inadequacies is created.
- AVID schools are places where faculty members collaborate. They are places where students are part of the conversation regarding teaching and learning, where students and teachers are

key participants in decisions about education.

- AVID faculty members, administrators, counselors, tutors, students, and parents have established norms of collegiality (usually in site team meetings) for discussing and debating the big questions about how to constantly improve the educational environment for all students. They are schools in which the larger questions about educational practice, equity and access, are constantly kept in the forefront of meetings and conversations.
- Successful AVID schools seek, produce, and consume information, and they see educational renewal as a continuing process, not as an event. They collect data on their students and educational programs, and set priorities based on thoughtful study of the realities of their schools.

Popular distrust of public education is growing. Everyone recognizes that racial and economic disparities fueled by gaps in educational achievement are one of the nation's most pressing and persistent problems. Preferences to overcome the adverse effects of discrimination within the educational system are clearly in political turmoil. Nevertheless, public support for efforts to narrow the gap is widespread. Our moral sense as Americans tells us that the beneficiaries are so deserving. Hardly anyone blames children for the homes, environments, or educational systems from which they come. Research and practice now show the educational community methods for attacking the achievement gap. It is high time we as citizens make this effort a national priority rather than relegating it to the realm of political pundits.

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AVID Summer Institutes, 1999

AVID Summer Institutes will host participants from over 26 states and foreign countries at two institutes in California and one Virginia institute, with total attendance estimated at over 3000.

The 12th Annual San Diego International Institute will take place at the Town and Country Hotel, from August 9-13, with a special pre-conference seminar focusing on the AVID Path materials, on August 5 and 6. Opening keynote speaker on August 9 will be Jay Mathews, education reporter for the Washington Post, and author of many books, including *Escalante, The Best Teacher in America*, and, most recently, *Class Struggle: What's Wrong (and Right) With America's Best Public High Schools*. Mr. Mathews' studied 75 high schools during his research for *Class Struggle*, and his work tells compelling stories of student and parent struggles to gain access to Advanced Placement courses at many of the schools. He also

provides examples of schools and teachers that provide access and support. Mathews was the keynote speaker at the 1998 Eastern Division Summer Institute. The closing luncheon for the San Diego Institute will focus on the theme "AVID, Changing the World," with examples of successful AVID students from throughout the world.

AVID's other California Summer Institute will be held at the Asilomar Conference Center in Pacific Grove (near Monterey), from July 26 - 30. Featured keynote presenters will be AVID Founder and Director Mary Catherine Swanson, and Dr. Cecil Lytle, Provost of Thurgood Marshall College at the University of California, San Diego. Lytle is an internationally recognized concert pianist who has performed and taught throughout the world. As Provost at UCSD, Dr. Lytle has been a strong advocate for education reform in the higher education and the K-12 system. He has been a catalyst behind the

founding of the new Preuss School at UCSD: a charter school modeled on AVID.

AVID's Third Annual Eastern Division Institute will be held in at the Hyatt Richmond at Brookfield, in Richmond, Virginia, from July 25 - 29. Featured keynote speaker will be Phil Bigler, National Teacher of the Year and former Virginia Teacher of the Year. Mr. Bigler has been teaching history and humanities for nearly 20 years, and is the author of four books, including *Hostile Fire: The Life and Death of Lt. Sharon Ann Lane*. Currently on leave from Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Alexandria, Virginia, Mr. Bigler serves as a spokesperson for education throughout the nation and the world. He has been recognized with a number of awards previously for his ability to make history relevant and exciting for his students, through the use of historical simulations.

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- 1 University of California Office of the President, 1998 Admission Figures.
- 2 The College Board, 1997 SAT Administration Data.
- 3 University of California Office of the President, 1998 Admission Figures.
- 4 Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, "America's Next Achievement Test: Closing the Black-White Test Score Gap," *The American Prospect* no. 40 (September-October 1998).
- 5 Mehan, et al. *Constructing School Success: The Consequences of Untracking Low-Achieving Students*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- 6 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (1997a). *The Condition of Education 1997*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Government Printing Office.
- 7 Resnick, Lauren. "From Aptitude to Effort: A New Foundation for Our Schools," *Learning Research and Development Center*. University of Pittsburgh (1995).
- 8 Mehan, et al. *Constructing School Success: The Consequences of Untracking Low-Achieving Students*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- 9 Jimerson, Shane et al. "A Prospective Longitudinal Study of the Correlates and Consequences of Early Grade Retention." *Journal of School Psychology* 35,1 (Spring, 1997): 3-25. EJ551713.
- 10 Ferguson, Ronald S., "Paying for Public Education: New Evidence of How and Why Money Matters," *Harvard Journal on Legislation* 28, Summer 1991.



The Mission of AVID

The mission of AVID is to ensure that all students, and most especially students in the middle capable of completing a college preparatory path:

- will succeed in the most rigorous curriculum,
- will enter mainstream activities of the school,
- will increase their enrollment in four-year colleges, and
- will become educated and responsible participants and leaders in a democratic society.