



Dr. Eric Smith:

Opening Access to Rigorous Coursework in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

When he became superintendent of North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in 1996, Dr. Eric Smith brought with him a reputation as a leader in raising achievement for all students. In his four years of leading Charlotte, one of the nation's largest urban school districts, Smith has indeed kept the focus on increased performance for a broad range of students, while providing support structures as well. In fact, all of Charlotte's over 40 middle schools and high schools offer the AVID Program, enrolling nearly 3,000 students. Test scores have risen throughout the district, with African-American students posting the greatest gains. In addition, more students are taking challenging coursework, particularly Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses. Again, the results for African-American students have been impressive. In 1991, only 77 African-American students enrolled in college-level courses. In 1999, 974 participated. Districtwide, over 6,000 Charlotte-Mecklenburg students sat for AP exams in 1999.

"We believe in Charlotte that school reform at the high school level needs to begin with an extraordinarily high expectation for students," said Smith. "In order to do that we have been pushing very hard to establish both Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs in all of our high schools. This is part of our equity effort, to make sure that

all schools throughout the system have a significant number of AP courses. We are trying to establish in each of our 14 high schools a minimum of 16 AP courses taught by certified AP teachers."

Smith, a consulting member of AVID Center's board of directors, discovered the AVID program in 1992. At that time, he was the superintendent of Virginia's Newport News Public Schools. While attending a conference in New Orleans put on by a friend, Smith arrived at the opening session late and found himself seated next to a teacher from California who taught a course called AVID. After a brief discussion, Smith found himself more interested in AVID than in the session, and, upon returning to Newport News, asked his staff to investigate the program. AVID was implemented in the district soon after and today that district enrolls over 2,000 AVID students.

Meeting the Challenge of Accountability

As superintendent in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Smith has gained a national reputation as an urban educator who has focused on early literacy programs, community and business involvement, technology, rigorous coursework for all students, and support systems like AVID. With North Carolina's emphasis on accountability through the state's ABC's of Public Education Accountability program, Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools have met the challenge of continuous improvement. For example, in the first year that all of the district's high schools were included in the ABC

rating system, 12 out of 14 achieved Exemplary Growth, while the other two met Expected Growth. Newsweek Magazine has named ten of the district's high schools in the nation's top 300 high schools.

"Administrators, teachers, and staff within CMS have set high standards for every child in our district, and we're working hard to ensure that all students are successful," says Smith. "An increase in state and local accountability programs has provided additional standards by which to measure our success."

AVID Supports Raised Expectations

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools continue to raise expectations for students, according to Smith, with a special focus on Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate opportunities. In 1999, 42% of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's graduates completed at least one AP or IB exam, compared to 31% in 1996. During that same period, the number of IB exams taken by Charlotte-Mecklenburg students more than doubled, while on 82% of those exams, students scored high enough to earn college credit.

"The AVID program has provided students in CMS with powerful instruction and support networks to help them be successful," says Smith. "Within our district we've found that students who participate in the AVID program are eager and prepared to enter rigorous coursework while in high school."