

Responding to 9/11: Calling of the Educated

By Mary Catherine Swanson
AVID Founder & Executive Director



EDITOR'S NOTE: Many of you heard Mary Catherine Swanson's keynote speech at the Summer Institutes, in which she implored educators to heed the call to "educate well all of our citizens" and, in so doing, to advance the ideals of democracy and freedom that we all cherish. But how has the role of students changed since 9/11? The following excerpts from a commencement address Swanson delivered in May at the University of San Diego touch on this theme, and may be useful in stimulating dialogue with your students.

As you leave the halls of learning for your career fields, your consciences as well as your minds will be tested at every turn. As certified, diplomaed, educated people, what is your responsibility beyond school? You undoubtedly already know what you will demand of this world, but what will you contribute to it?

As you reflect on your college career, surely the events of 9/11 will punctuate your memory. While there is no equal to the horrific act of terrorism on that day, within our country we witness acts undermining our democracy each day. Terrorist organizations recruit from their own neighborhoods and bring the disaffected to camps in places such as Afghanistan where these malcontents are trained in the tactics of terror. Gangs in America use the same strategies, luring into drugs and violence those who yearn to belong to a power structure. Acts of exclusion,

and the inevitable ignorance which follow, lead people to seek revenge whether they be those who live in poverty or people oppressed in Afghanistan or students left behind in the American school system (those who never have the opportunity to attend a university such as yours).

It is clear that without access to a quality education, people are subjected to becoming what others intend for them to become and the few in power and privileges weave the fabric of society. The uneducated dispossessed come to hate that of which they are not a part. Their leaders are self-appointed, and their goal is to destroy the principles which an education based on values of freedom promote.

How must we fight to win this war? How will we win the war and not just the battle? We must educate well all of our citizens, just as you have been educated. We must do

whatever it takes to educate all who are born in America and all who come to America, for if we don't we will all suffer the consequences just as we did on September 11. Ignorance brings down not only buildings but all democracies. So the threat is not just to iconic buildings in America and the solution is not just to destroy terrorist networks. The threat is to all freedoms and the solution is to educate all well so that justice and prosperity for the poor and dispossessed is possible, and so that people everywhere can see the chance of a better future through the hard work and the creative power of the free and educated citizen, not the violence and savagery of the fanatic and the downtrodden. We have a choice: defeat ignorance or be defeated by it.

Our own democratic society has not yet fulfilled the ideal of dignity through education for all people. But our mission is clear, and the effort, no matter how great, must be made. As a teacher and as the founder of AVID, this calling has been mine, and I ask you to make the calling yours as well. This is the blessing of a good education and the strength and hope of a democratic society.

To this day I am stunned that I have been honored nationally for fulfilling a teacher's job in developing AVID. AVID's power is that the program helps those who are less fortunate in our country fulfill the American Dream of rising from the bottom through hard work and determination to take their rightful place on the playing field of

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test scores improving from the worst in the district to well in the upper half in just two years. The school has eliminated all remedial classes, opting instead to require those students who need extra help to take a tutorial “elective.” Critical to preparing students for college admission, Southwest High has opened Advanced Placement to all students who choose to tackle such rigorous coursework and seek the support they need to succeed. Mr. Devore expects to offer 30 AP classes in the 2002-03 school year as students in the Compact for Success matriculate to his campus, double the number of a year ago. Likewise, Southwest High students are taking 680 AP exams this year, up from 360 a year ago. Next year the exams should number over 1,000.

“Schoolwide AVID has served to get teachers out of isolation into an instructional vision focused on literacy, where everyone understands what their role is,” says Mr. Devore. “Every teacher is a reading teacher first, every teacher is a writing teacher first.” Departments come together to analyze progress and departments work together to develop protocols for improving teaching methods.

Making such changes is not without challenges. High school teachers prize their independence and some are reluctant to change years of instructional practice. Mr. Devore counters with an analogy. “Imagine if Doug Flutie got into the huddle with the Chargers offense and called the play, ‘Do what you want. Do what you want. Do what you want.’ Even though all those players are skilled professionals at the top of their game, do they have a chance of scoring? No way.”

The Compact for Success ensures that middle and high school faculties will have further opportunities to work together as SDSU faculty

collaborate with district teachers in curriculum development. SDSU already offers a college-level writing class on the Southwest High campus, and more course offerings are planned. In addition, SDSU will provide college students to Sweetwater Union High School District as high school and middle school tutors.

Mr. Devore thinks the Compact will serve to reset the image of his students, both in their minds and in the minds of the community. “How do we go about teaching kids to be college graduates? We let them see what a college grad looks like and give them that kind of thinking.”

When asked if he has any advice for other principals undertaking schoolwide reform through AVID methodologies, Mr. Devore offers this: “It takes time. Create a vision rather than practice random acts of teaching.”

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American society. Assuring this kind of dignity for all people IS my responsibility as a teacher, and it must be yours, too. We, the educated, must affirm ourselves as a community of conscience.

We must define our times and not be defined by them. Because our education has taught us to be determined and strong, this will not be an age of ignorance and terror. Through our grief and anger on September 11 we have been reminded of our mission and our moment. Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time, now depends on us.

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