

An Interview with John Yochelson

Research of over 200 educational programs shows that AVID stands out



By Adam Behar, *AVID Director of Public Relations*

Attracting minorities and women to careers in science and engineering is John Yochelson's mission. As head of BEST (Building Engineering and Science Talent) and with an NSF (National Science Foundation) grant, he hired the American Institutes for Research, and convened blue ribbon panels, to determine "best practices" in K-12 education. Of the 200 programs reviewed, AVID stood out. In the fall, Yochelson will present his findings to Congress and the NSF.

What are the objectives of the report?

The first objective really was to create a knowledge base in a very systematic and rigorous way of programs that are working to diversify our talent. We want to look at the part of the glass that is full, not the part of the glass that is empty. There are pockets of success and we need to identify what those pockets are and we need to have a basis of defining them as successful in ways that are not simply the personal views of one group of people who somebody else might not agree with. So that effort to figure out what's working led us to create three blue ribbon panels, one to look at the pre-K through 12 universe in which AVID shines brightly, one to look at the universe of higher education, and one to look at the workplace.

Who are the potential audiences for this report?

The audiences will include policy makers who make decisions about resources, and the educators who want to know what it is that they

ought to be doing to do a better job in this field. The private sector funders also need to maximize the value of the investment they are making, and certainly to a significant degree, we hope that the audience will include parents who need to make informed decisions...students who have a stake and know things that work well and the under-represented groups, those segments in our population who need a much greater awareness of opportunities in that area. So it's a very broad audience.

What have you learned from this study that you didn't know before?

Well, certainly we have learned how thin the evidence base is, or confirmed how thin the evidence base is; how many decisions are being made on the basis of anecdote, or impressions or sales pitch or, in a more positive way, professional judgment of good people. But these decisions that are now being made, relatively speaking, are not the kinds of informed decisions that should be

made. It takes a tremendous amount of resources to build an evidence base, and some organizations say they'd rather spend those dollars on direct services to kids, and you can't blame them. But these days if you want to be a player on the national stage, you have to invest in research. The programs that can show, not just say, but prove that they can produce...those are the programs that should be funded. That's just the way it goes. And AVID is one of those programs.

Of the successful programs you studied, what attributes do they share?

Here's what we take to be the outstanding principles that AVID and other great programs have. The first is that they all work on the basis of a clearly understood outcome that everybody shares, which in the case of AVID is admission to a 4-year college. And you know the desired outcome before you ever start. You would be surprised at the number of programs that don't have that degree of clarity, that don't have that sense

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of mission; and also something that provides feedback that allows you to know whether or not you are achieving that goal.

The second shared characteristic is persistence—the ability to combine leadership and resources and buy-in over time and in the face of major setbacks. AVID is a classic story of overcoming not one adversity, but challenge after challenge after challenge, and that steadfastness is critically important and is shared by every program that is effective over time. Implicit in persistence is also the ability to learn from mistakes.

Item three is challenging content. We found that across all successful programs there was content that stretched the students, that went beyond the sort of average competence. All the successful programs had really challenging content, they had rigor and they raised the bar.

Fourth is engaged adults. Every program that we looked at had engaged adults, engaged teachers, engaged parents, engaged mentors. You really do need a support infrastructure of people who know what they’re about.

The fifth factor, again very vividly reflected in AVID, is personalization, meaning that you are getting to each student as an individual. It isn’t a cookie cutter. You are reaching the individual kid who is important.

Defined outcomes, persistence, challenging content, engaged adults,

and personalization—those are the five things that matter most. And they are part of the AVID legacy.

How do you suggest that AVID Center and the districts across the country use this report?

We hope that they will take seriously our recommendations regarding the importance of evidence. We hope that they will take seriously, and apply the design principles that constitute a best practice. We are very keen on trying to align and bridge the programs that are successful with the entire system. As Mary Catherine learned in the early days of her experiences here, it is easy for educators with system-wide agendas to overlook programs that are strong. It was a phenomenal achievement on her part to get classroom time...to get a budget line. That represents acknowledgement that AVID is part of the system. The Algebra Project, for example, doesn’t have classroom delivery opportunities. Not at the level that AVID does. Lots of programs are sort of that evolution toward getting embedded in the system.

The idea is how do we bring programs from the periphery to become integral parts of our system. And there are things to be learned from AVID’s success and yet as I believe Mary Catherine would be the first to say, that job is never done. Fighting to become, to maintain and to build upon a position within the system is a tremendously difficult thing to do. 🐾