



An Interview with Dr. Michael Riley

AVID supports acceleration in Bellevue, Washington

By Robert Gira

National Program Director

Now in his eighth year as the Superintendent of the Bellevue School District in Bellevue, Washington, Dr. Michael Riley has increasing expectations for all students through the implementation of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs. Under Dr. Riley's leadership, Bellevue is now among the top one percent of school districts in the nation in terms of the participation rate and quality of its advanced programs. In the fall of 2004, the Bellevue District implemented AVID at five schools, to provide increasing support for college preparation and access. Dr. Riley is a frequent speaker nationally on the topic of rigorous curriculum and college preparation for all students, and he has previously appeared on AVID panels and advisory committees. He will be one of the keynote speakers at the AVID/College Board National Conference, April 14 and 15 in San Diego.

What is your vision for equity and access in your district?

I think it's clear that we've entered the age of *universal* college education, a time when almost all kids in America aspire to be college grads. Unfortunately, only about a quarter of America's high school students are enrolled in a strong college prep curriculum. We express dismay over the fact that so many kids who enter college are forced to take remedial courses

and so many drop out after only one year of attendance. But we shouldn't be a bit surprised by this. It's a totally logical outcome of the fact that we are failing to prepare them for college work.

Why is access to rigorous curriculum for all students in your district such an important issue?

High school everywhere in America should provide a college

prep curriculum to all students. In Bellevue, we've made this our goal for years, backward mapping from advanced level courses in the junior and senior years all the way to kindergarten. Eighty-one percent of the Class of 2004 completed at least one AP or IB course. Forty-two percent completed at least four. More importantly, sixty-seven percent of African Americans, fifty-seven percent of Hispanics, eighty-six percent of Multi-Ethnics, sixty percent of our free/reduced lunch recipients, sixty percent of ELL students, and thirty percent of IEP students completed AP or IB courses. All kids can achieve at these levels if we give them the curriculum they need from the start of their days in school and are there to support them when they falter.

What are some of the current initiatives in your district that support all students meeting rigorous academic standards?

We are involved in a unique partnership with The College Board, Standards for Success, Achieve, the National Research Center for TIMSS, Partnership for Learning, the University of Washington, and Bellevue Community College to identify the best college prep standards in the country and design curriculum that enables all students to master those standards. The expertise of these organizations and the people who represent them have been a godsend to us, and we are busy revising curriculum, strengthening it, thanks to their help.

What are the challenges and how is the progress going?

The challenge is that we can't seem to move fast enough. With the wealth of information we've been given, we are doing everything we can to speed along curriculum development and implementation, but as anyone who has been involved in this work knows, this can be a long and complex process. We want all of our kids to get the best the nation has to offer them, so we press on with as much urgency as possible.

What role do you hope AVID will play in helping your schools meet district achievement goals?

No matter how good curriculum, no matter how expert the teaching staff, some kids will need extra help, and this is where AVID comes in to play for us. While we're pleased with our progress, we don't intend to rest until every single kid gets a college prep education, and like most places in the U.S., we see that it is our poor kids, our kids of color, and our kids with special needs who struggle the most to meet AP and IB standards. We know they can do it, but we also know they need mentoring, tutoring, and other forms of assistance to excel. AVID provides a comprehensive, highly structured, and well-researched approach, and we're very pleased it is available to us. 🙌

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Send your ideas and success stories to

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