

# An Interview with Pedro Noguera

## Examining AVID's place in leveling the urban playing field

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**Dr. Pedro Noguera, formerly the Judith K. Dimon Professor of Communities and Schools at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and now a professor of education at New York University, has studied the complexities of urban schools for many years. His third book, *City Schools and the American Dream: Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education*, published by Teacher's College Press, 2003, examines the challenges facing urban schools and the youth they serve.**

A former K-12 classroom teacher and school board member, Dr. Noguera has been honored by the Wellness Foundation for his research on youth violence, and he received the University of California's Distinguished Teaching Award in 1997. He is also involved in a project with the Gates Foundation to redesign Bronx schools. Dr. Noguera has been a featured keynote speaker at AVID Summer Institutes and will appear at the AVID Southwest Summer Institute in Austin, Texas, on June 19. Recently, he responded to questions regarding some of the conditions of U.S. education that present challenges for students and the educators who serve them.

**You have spoken about anti-intellectualism as a pervasive trend in the U.S. How can this be happening to one of the world's most progressive nations?**

It is happening on so many fronts. Just the fact that we are so influenced by the media has a particular impact on children. The more children are exposed to TV and video games, the less emphasis they place on reading. But it is not just the media. Schools have contributed to anti-intellectualism as well. We force-feed information to kids, particularly with the advent of high-stakes testing and we end up boring kids and taking the curiosity out of learning. We have

to spark the natural desire of kids to learn and to seek out information. If we were to support that in schools, the natural inquisitiveness of children would be cultivated. But to many students, learning has become a chore, alien to who they are. Too many students see intellectual pursuits as something to be avoided. Even our best students are far more preoccupied with grades than with learning.

### **How does a program like AVID make it safer for students to function as intellectuals?**

I think that AVID, when it is implemented well, does two things in this area. First, it creates a classroom environment where kids are encouraged to take learning seriously, and, secondly, to see themselves as scholars. I'd like to expand that notion beyond school, after school, at home. AVID also creates an environment for peer support, and for kids, that's everything. If you can create an intellectual environment and peer support, it can have long-term effects.

### **Social inequality is a consistent theme in your work. What strides are we making as a nation to erase the social inequities associated with our educational system, and what role does AVID play?**

We are making very few strides. In fact, we don't even seem to be talking about it any more. This is troubling, as research shows us. For example, we know preschool is important for the cognitive development of infants and that it lays the foundation for learning throughout life, but instead of expanding programs like Head Start, we continue to treat early childhood education like babysitting, and now we are focusing on more and earlier testing. We should be expanding the support. All developed western nations have preschool programs

for everyone, and we don't. The irony here is that, at the federal level, there is an emphasis on equity with No Child Left Behind, but not paying attention to the needs of children (food, health care, emotional support) makes it difficult for schools to serve the needs of students. We have large numbers of poor students, and schools can't address their intellectual needs because basic needs aren't addressed.

AVID is playing a role in showing it is possible to produce high achievement and access to college through intensive support. But we need to keep focusing on ensuring equal opportunities through education. If a school has one AVID class, they should recognize the need to do more.

### **Research shows that AVID has a strong, positive influence on the peer group. How important is this, especially for poor and underserved students?**

For all kids, the peer influence is important. But for poor kids it is particularly an influence. If your friends are not focused on school and are involved in harmful activities, then the impact will be severe. The peer culture in schools is generally not supportive of academics, but works in the opposite direction, taking students into risky behavior.

### **You have written about young men being particularly at risk for college preparation and acceptance. What are the facts on this, and how did the situation develop?**

It is an interesting situation. Ten or fifteen years ago, we were really concerned about girls. A study called "Failing at Fairness" came out regarding gender equity and it noted how girls were being short-changed. What's going on now is that in every state, more girls than boys are enroll-

ing in college. You will also find more girls than boys in AP classes. For upper middle class males, this is not as much an issue. They are still represented and gain acceptances to the best schools like Harvard and Yale. But for everyone else, including middle class white males, it is a problem of class structure, accentuated by race. The research on the problem is limited, and we don't know exactly why it is happening. My hunch is that two factors are involved. First, in the current labor market, certain jobs will favor girls over boys, and, for girls, the payoff for education is more evident. Also, I believe that where boys get their "strokes" is for demonstrating masculinity, and this is generally not conducive to high performance in school.

### **As AVID spreads across the U.S., it is being implemented in more large, urban districts. What particular challenges do such districts present?**

The main problem with large districts is scale. They are just so large that they are subjected to a host of political problems, including turnover in leadership and union issues, which might not be directly related to education, but inhibit progress. Then you add in overcrowded schools and large class size, and it makes it hard to do the work well. In large districts, you also have pervasive disorganization when they are not well managed, affecting basic needs like materials and getting schools cleaned. More importantly, middle class, suburban schools feel accountable to the parents they serve because these parents have such a strong sense of entitlement and will demand more. In large, urban districts there is sometimes a pervasive lack of customer service at every level, which creates antagonism. So, instead of a strong working partnership, we end up with a strained relationship caused by contempt and disrespect toward poor families. 🐼