

An Interview with Dr. Joe A. Hairston

Superintendent of Baltimore County Public Schools

By Adam Behar

Director of External Affairs

Part one of two. Part two will be featured in the next ACCESS.

Dr. Joe A. Hairston is Superintendent of Baltimore County Public Schools. Adam Behar, AVID Center's Director of External Affairs, recently spoke with Dr. Hairston about the events that helped shape his philosophy and career, his vision for AVID, and future plans.

I understand, Dr. Hairston, that Coretta Scott King, Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter were early supporters of yours and that you were the first black superintendent in Clayton County, GA (Metro Atlanta). How does your personal history and our nation's history inform your work as superintendent and your commitment to AVID?

Clayton County had challenges and rewards for me. It was my first superintendent position. That, in itself, was awesome. Although my background as an administrator in Prince Georges County had prepared me, there is nothing like the actual experience. I am grateful that I had the support and encouragement of Mrs. King through the King Foundation as well as President and Mrs. Carter and the Carter Center. Regarding my personal history, although I know that race too frequently shows itself negatively in the American consciousness, I don't dwell on it.

Instead, I choose to focus on the job at hand and the role that I have in addressing it. I am a proud black American. While that is a constant, it does not, nor should it, totally define me as a person. As far as my personal history and that of the nation, those two are intertwined. Of course being black in my youth during the fifties and sixties impacted my psyche. Basically, those experiences made me more determined to fight for equity among all people. As I matured, there were a number of obstacles that I knew would confront me. However, my parents and family always stressed that barriers could be overcome. They also instilled in me the fact that, regardless of what anyone might say, my race was an asset and not a barrier. People often limit themselves by the boundaries they set. I was and remain determined that that will not happen with me. I seek to pass that same attitude on to my children as well as the students I serve, who are also my children.

When did implementation of AVID begin in the Baltimore County Public Schools? What were the factors that gave rise to it?

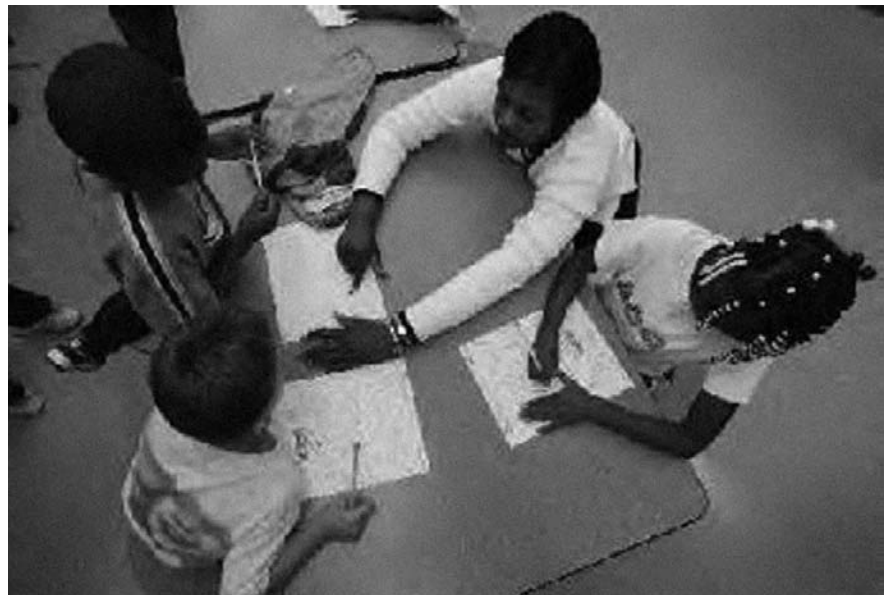
Formal implementation of AVID in Baltimore County Public Schools began in September 2002. In July of 2002, each of the first six schools sent a team of six-to-eight people who would function as the school's site team. These core teachers were trained in the methodologies to assist average students in overcoming the barriers to college acceptance. Baltimore County now has expanded the AVID program to include 15 high schools.

The planning for AVID began in Baltimore County four years ago. It took one year in the preliminary planning to determine how AVID would be effectively infused into the high school programs. When we first considered AVID, we noted that a number of students in Baltimore County, as well as within school systems throughout

the country, were not meeting their potential. These students are often overlooked because they are caught in the middle both academically and statistically. The goals in our Blueprint for Progress, which is the foundation document of this school system, are based on a key premise that when we speak of students, “all means all.” That is regardless of race, socioeconomics, or any other background characteristic.

What is the mission of BCPS? How does AVID help you fulfill it?

The mission of Baltimore County is to provide a quality education to all students and enable them to reach their fullest potential as lifelong learners and productive citizens in our society. By “quality education,” we mean that one develops the content knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will enable them to reach their maximum



potential as responsible, productive citizens and life-long learners. The focus of this mission is to ensure that each student can compete in a challenging and competitive world after leaving high school. To that end, high school principals need support and assistance in ensuring that they are providing their students with challenging instruction and a learning environment that prepares them for the future. We are entering a time when some sort of postsecondary education is essential. As our students prepare for post-secondary education, our schools are responsible for preparing all students to achieve high academic standards.

AVID assists in fulfilling this mission by focusing on students from the perspective of their individual potential for excellence. The AVID program in BCPS is completely aligned with the goals, indicators, and strategies in the school system’s Blueprint for Progress, which corresponds with, yet predates, No Child Left Behind, America 2000, the national education goals, and Maryland’s master plan protocols.

From the district’s perspective, what are the challenges and opportunities in the notion that all students should have the opportunity to go to college?

The challenges and opportunities related to college stem from the disparate backgrounds of many of our students. Some students come from homes where parents have experienced college at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Some students come from homes where they would be the first persons in their families to have the opportunity to attend college. AVID assists the school system by providing a curricular intervention as well as a program in each school that enable us to make students aware of the possibilities of college, educate them in the skills necessary for college, and assist them in the practical steps necessary to reach that goal. This facet is enriched by the partnership between Baltimore County, AVID, and the College Board. It’s all a part of our responsibility to provide every student with the best possible education. 📖

"Therefore, the primary factor that drives AVID in Baltimore County is our commitment to making certain that all students have appropriate access to higher level learning."



An Interview with Dr. Joe A. Hairston

Superintendent of Baltimore County Public Schools

By Adam Behar
Director of External Affairs

Part two of two. Part one was featured in the last ACCESS.

Adam Behar, AVID Center's Director of External Affairs, recently spoke with Dr. Hairston about the events that helped shape his philosophy and career, his vision for AVID, and future plans.

In BCPS, AVID was initially seen as an intervention for a specific population of students. While the AVID elective remains a key part of your reform initiative, under your leadership it has evolved and become more integrated. How would you characterize the role AVID plays in BCPS today?

We are pleased with the way that AVID fits into other reform efforts ongoing in our schools. The key here is seamless integration. True, as AVID began in Baltimore County, it was intended to address minority students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. We targeted these students because many of them fell into that gray middle area of under-achievement disproportionately. However, as the program developed, with its emphasis on professional development and schoolwide infusion to provide all students access to its benefits, we broadened the scope within our schools. During its early phase, AVID was funded by monies included in a minority achievement grant. Now AVID has become part of the routine operational budget. We are committed to placing AVID in all of Baltimore County's high schools

by 2008. Currently there are 15 AVID high schools. Next year, five more schools will begin implementation. AVID is having a large impact on Baltimore County schools. There are over 42 AVID classes making an impact on the other non-AVID students. There are over 1,000 highly rigorous courses, such as Gifted and Talented, AP, Honors, and IB being taken by AVID students.

Incorporation of AVID simultaneously responds to advanced standards in high school assessment necessary for graduation as well as criteria for effective high school reform. Overall, AVID is part of a larger BCPS goal to increase academic rigor for all students and provide them the opportunity for post-secondary education. Essentially, AVID becomes the means by which all students in the school have access to strong academic support in a structured manner. AVID, also, by focusing on professional development to enhance instructional competencies and skills, meets the local, state, and federal goals of increasing the percentage of highly qualified teachers. AVID was originally

conceptualized to address needs of minority and low socioeconomic students in schools with challenges. Now, AVID is the means used system-wide to capture students who may not have had opportunity for or exposure to highly rigorous courses.

I understand that in BCPS all low level courses have been eliminated so that more students can be moved into rigorous classes. Was that move met with much resistance and if so, how did you overcome it?

Instruction is the most important component of education. And, sound curriculum is crucial in driving effective instruction. When I first came to Baltimore County, I was surprised at the number of non-rigorous courses that existed. Many of these courses provided neither the content nor the challenge to prepare students to compete in the future. I met with staff members and asked that all of these courses be eliminated, as well as any other course that did not provide academic rigor to our students. It did take some time to accomplish this. This paradigm did not change instantly;

however, in time, everyone joined in the effort, recognizing how this move would benefit all students.

Basically, in our schools, all low level courses have been eliminated in order to move more students towards rigorous instruction. Regarding AVID, the progress of these students is followed at the local school level, the district level, and by the AVID national headquarters for participation in rigorous courses.

Word has it that you enjoy getting out of the office and visiting sites where AVID is being implemented. What is it you're hearing and seeing?

I would not be exaggerating if I said that visiting the AVID sites is one of the most enjoyable parts of my job. When I am in the schools, I witness the positive influence that AVID is having on students—students who prior to AVID would have had little chance of fulfilling their hopes. Essentially, students who before may have aspired to nothing more than completing high school are now talking about careers about which they didn't even dare dream. I talk to the students who are now leaders in their schools. Most important, without AVID, many of these students would have remained invisible. AVID helps make real the message that I have for all students—"You can do it."

This year, many AVID schools will have Smaller Learning Communities and many schools are making AVID one of the learning communities. We are excited to see the marriage between the two, the integration. How is it going thus far?

In most cases, schools have made AVID one of the learning communities. The AVID strategies are infused into all of the Smaller Learning Communities. As a matter of fact, when I first considered Smaller Learning Communities

as key to a high school reform initiative in Baltimore County, I saw that AVID would serve very well as an exemplary start. AVID and Smaller Learning Communities are inextricably linked in Baltimore County. AVID was the precursor to Smaller Learning Communities and forms the cornerstone of that high school reform. Our high school reform effort needed an active research-based model that could be implemented systemically and systematically. AVID provided and continues to be that model.

What makes AVID unique relative to other initiatives or programs?

AVID is unique in that it touches on all aspects of students' academic experiences. Not only are teachers specifically instructed in addressing the needs of the AVID students, they bring this wealth of information about practices into the ordinary school program to touch all other students. AVID students are not a group working in isolation. These students, besides their AVID elective class, spend their school days interacting with many teachers. Therefore, it is important that all teachers are versed in the philosophy and skills promoted within AVID. In short, AVID's uniqueness rests in the fact that it simultaneously focuses on the individual student while enhancing the way education is delivered to all students throughout the school. Basically, AVID represents the good schooling and instructionally sound climate that is desired by every principal in every school.

Please tell me about your involvement in The Leadership Collaborative for College Readiness. Why did you become involved and why do you think its mission is so vital?

I see the collaborative as a means of obtaining and sharing information about promising practices and initiatives that will improve education

of students in our high schools, thus providing them better access to college. This Collaborative enables educational leaders from around the country to join in exploring initiatives and models that have led to significant improvements. We are now in the midst of the information age, which impacts daily routines in all businesses. And make no mistake, education is a very big business. There is also increased stress on accountability. In education, we must respond to many variables, from parents to local to federal government. The one constant in education today is change. Thus, it is more important than ever that we have the latest information related to innovations in this field.

Based on your experience, what would you tell other superintendents who are new to AVID?

AVID is an effective functioning model for high school reform. We are in an era where much emphasis is being placed on educating children during their early years. However, this trend in attending to the needs of our younger students should not supplant our efforts on behalf of students at the latter end of the educational spectrum. Too often, too many students are merely written-off during the high school years. AVID, through its dual focus on enhancing the performance of students and school staff, provides another chance for success to students. In many cases, it may well be their last chance. Again, AVID helps assure that "all" truly means "all," not just that top percent who are already programmed for college. Simply stated, AVID provides the structure, positive reinforcement, guidance, and support to many students who might otherwise be inextricably stuck in the middle. 🙌

**Have you visited
www.avidonline.org
lately?**