



Superintendent Profile: Dan Lowengard

By Adam Behar
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As AVID gains momentum in the Northeast, we thought it appropriate to profile a New York superintendent. Syracuse has given us Tom Cruise, Richard Gere and, for all you heavy metal fans out there, Ronnie James Dio. Quite a trio, wouldn't you say? And now we can add Dan Lowengard to the mix.

Dan who?

Dan Lowengard is Superintendent of the Syracuse City School District. Previously he was Superintendent of Schools for the Utica school system from 1998 to 2005. Prior to 1998, he was an administrator and teacher in Syracuse.

Hired just over a year ago, Lowengard presides over a district in which 75 percent of its students qualify for free or reduced lunch and 50 percent are African-American.

AVID's presence in Syracuse dates to 2003, when it began implementation with one school and one AVID elective. Since then, it's ramped up

to 52 sections of AVID, serving an estimated 900 students in 13 schools.

Lowengard says among the keys to closing the achievement gap are small learning communities, personalized instruction, and great partnerships with area universities and colleges.

"One of the things I'm particularly not interested in is doing things on a pilot basis. Once the horse is out of the gate, it's usually too late to build the capacity to take AVID districtwide. For all the talk of replication, we've learned in education that we don't replicate our successes, at least not in large, urban districts. So for every initiative, we're asking, how do we do this districtwide? How will it affect every student?"

His strategy for cultivating college-ready students? "First, academic preparation and second, providing students with the tools to cope with social pressures at college for which students are often ill-prepared."

For Lowengard, that means getting students' feet wet with college before they leave high school.

"Early college experiences push students academically with accelerated, rigorous coursework, but it's also important in a social sense. It helps them develop the maturity while they still have a structured life at home."

It also means more personalized instruction, says Lowengard, who is dividing four comprehensive schools

into 14 small learning communities. They will nurture the skills and attitudes that are fostered through AVID's elective and trainings.

"The AVID trainings will have a major influence on how the communities are developed," he says. "The AVID elective will exist in every small learning community."

It's never easy to capture in words exactly why AVID is so successful, but Superintendent Lowengard does a pretty good job. "I have heard many stories of AVID turning their teachers around, and I think it's because of three elements: One, the content is powerful; two, the process of staff development is one that is supporting learning and achievement; and three, it's important that AVID is not done piecemeal in this district, but rather, in the context of a change that is going to happen in the entire building. When we put those three elements together, we're going to leverage major changes in achievement across the board for both AVID and non-AVID students."

One of the obstacles, he says, is that funding sources typically fund small pilot projects. Taking an initiative districtwide requires a much bigger, ongoing commitment. Which is why Lowengard takes some comfort – and pride – in having received two, back-to-back Advanced Placement[®] Incentive Program (APIP) grants.

What does it take to maintain AVID in a district? Lowengard modestly deflects that one, saying he's only

been the Syracuse superintendent for just over a year.

“Credit should be given to those who preceded me and who laid the foundation,” he says. “What I’ve been able to do is to challenge the system by taking AVID in a systemwide direction, so it’s not an isolated pilot.”

Lowengard emphasizes the need for quality professional development and ongoing support. “Institutionalizing AVID requires finance and leadership. The building principals have to be unwavering in their support. And when you get that level of support, it becomes contagious among the educators in that building. And what we’re finding is that this

excitement breeds support in the community.”

One manifestation of this support is that his board of education is willing to commit resources to continue AVID.

He’s no Tom Cruise. Or Richard Gere, for that matter. He’s Dan Lowengard.

And that’s good enough for me.

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Syracuse City School District Snapshot

- 21,000 students
- Implementation began in 2003 with one school and one AVID elective
- Quickly ramped up to five sections, then 24, and now 52 sections
- Currently reaches approximately 900 students in 13 schools
- Back-to-back APIP grants
- Superintendent’s vision for AVID is as a districtwide system; currently investigating AVID Elementary component
- AVID seen as essential to success of small learning communities

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as Georgia State University and Morehouse College.

According to Dr. Barbara Smith, AVID’s Eastern Division Director, “An exciting three-year initiative is underway to build upon that growth.” Supported by two funders, this private-public partnership aims to expand AVID to 10,000 students across eight school districts. This effort is a catalyst for building a college-going culture in Atlanta’s schools based on high expectations and support for all students.

North Carolina

North Carolina has historically been a rural state, with much of the population living on farms and in small towns. Over the last 30 years the trend has been one of rapid urbanization, and now the majority live in urban and suburban areas. Charlotte and Raleigh, for example, are now major cities with large, ethnically and linguistically diverse populations.

In particular, there’s been a boom in the number of Hispanics settling into the state, mainly from Mexico, Central America and, increasingly, the Dominican Republic. This, of course, underscores the need for AVID in North Carolina, which is home to 41 private and 74 public colleges and universities, including the highly regarded University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Duke University, and Wake Forest University. The state’s rich postsecondary tradition will benefit from increased access and rigor for all students.

North Carolina has 115 public school systems, the biggest of which are the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and the Wake County Public School System. AVID is a strong force in both districts.

According to AVID North Carolina State Director Gloria Cox, AVID is now implemented in 171 schools across 31 school districts. With those kinds of numbers, it’s no wonder that the state will send more than 700

teachers and administrators to the 2007 Summer Institute in Atlanta.

Cox has her hands full. “I’m working on expansion of AVID and the fidelity of the implementation piece,” she says. Not to mention her efforts to secure state funding for AVID along the lines of Texas’ House Bill 1. This model legislation, which AVID Center Executive Director Jim Nelson helped bring to fruition, provides \$275 per student in grades 9-12 (based on the district’s average daily attendance) for college-readiness programs and activities.

Then there’s the districtwide piece: “Increasing AVID within current districts where we need greater articulation up and down is a priority of mine.”

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