Abstract

Decades of research have done little to impact the persistent gaps in achievement and college and career readiness between ethnic and socioeconomic subgroups of students. Conceptualizing the achievement gap as a reflection of existing opportunity and expectation gaps refocuses the conversation from fixing students to fixing schools. The AVID College and Career Readiness Framework (the Framework) provides a structure and a common language that articulates AVID’s theory of action for establishing equity and access to educational resources and experiences, promoting college and career readiness for all students.

The Framework contains three structural components:
1. Domains that drive schools: Instruction, Systems, Leadership, and Culture
2. Elements defining college and career readiness: Rigorous Academic Preparedness, Opportunity Knowledge, and Student Agency
3. Adult behaviors promoting college and career readiness: Insist on Rigor, Break Down Barriers, Align the Work, and Advocate for Students.

When used as intended, the Framework helps inform intentional district and school leadership actions, resulting in the near elimination of gaps in achievement between ethnic and socioeconomic student subgroups. Evidence of AVID’s impact on system inputs, like increasing rigorous course offerings and minimizing gaps in college readiness among student subgroups, is proven using completion rates of college entrance requirements, college enrollment rates, and the proportion of students persisting into their second year of college. Emphasis is placed on the importance of relational capacity and building trusting relationships as the foundation for developing student agency and college and career readiness in all students.
Introduction

The AVID College and Career Readiness Framework (the Framework) provides structure and a common language for articulating AVID’s theory of action for establishing equity and access to educational resources and experiences, leading to college and career readiness for all students. When used as intended, the Framework helps inform district and school leadership toward ensuring that college and career readiness is available/happening for all students. To that end, the Framework focuses on student and adult behaviors, the learning environment, and organizational structures at the school and district levels that, when attended to with intentionality, can have a significant impact on minimizing gaps in student achievement and college readiness.

Decades of research have done little to impact the persistent gaps in achievement and college and career readiness between ethnic and socioeconomic subgroups of students. This is due, in part, to widely accepted notions that these gaps are primarily a result of student attributes such as poverty, minority status, lack of familial support, and low educational attainment of parents—few of which are directly impacted by schools. An alternative perspective is to consider subgroup differences a reflection of system inputs (e.g., opportunity and expectation gaps), which refocuses explanatory inquiry away from student attributes to how schools go about the business of educating and the influence that school culture has on student achievement.

The underwhelming pace at which gaps in achievement have been impacted can also be attributed to the system-wide emphasis on standardized testing. State and federal accountability legislation forced educators to focus on ensuring that high proportions of students met proficiency benchmarks on standards-based assessments in order to avoid sanctions or school takeovers by the state. While these efforts did bring attention to underserved student subgroups, most system changes resulted in little more than doubling down on test preparation and narrowed content mastery, which resulted in the reduction or elimination of elective courses frequently identified as music, art, and vocational education (e.g., woodworking, metal, and auto shop).

Meanwhile, colleges and universities continue to move away from content-based standardized tests as measures of postsecondary readiness in order to generate a more diverse pool of applicants. Simultaneously, postsecondary institutions are looking toward noncognitive or metacognitive skills/assessments as ways for students to demonstrate their ability to access, engage, persist, and grow within a multicultural, semi-structured, rigorous learning environment that reflects what most college campuses look like today. Similarly, the business sector is in desperate need of entry-level employees who have basic social, emotional, and metacognitive skills, such as organization, time management, collaboration, personal interaction/engagement, and complex reasoning abilities.

Research shows that students often have differential access to college and career readiness curriculum and programs, with the often-marginalized students having fewer options and opportunities. It is our contention that by using a broad, system-centric perspective as a backdrop, the AVID College and Career Readiness Framework—theoretically derived and research-based—will empower educators to activate their teaching and leadership in ways that establish equitable and rigorous learning environments, minimize gaps in opportunity and achievement, promote student agency, and accelerate their efforts to prepare all students for the rigors of college and careers.
The AVID College and Career Readiness Framework

The intent of the Framework is to provide educators, community members, parents, and students with a model of what AVID is and what it is not. What AVID is not is a silver bullet or “answer” to all the very complex, layered, and challenging issues facing public education today. What the Framework is intended to do is provide the education community with a common language and understanding of what the necessary skills, experiences, and attributes are that students need to possess in order to successfully realize their college and/or career aspirations. Moreover, the Framework includes specific adult behaviors that help pave the way for student success when considered within the four domains that drive a school: Instruction, Systems, Leadership, and Culture.

The AVID College and Career Readiness Framework contains three structural components:

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Districts and schools present similar and unique challenges that are addressed before, during, and after each school year. Schools using the Framework determine their own entry point based on their multiyear strategic plans, school improvement plans, and/or college and career readiness goals. In this way, the Framework affords a nimbleness that allows schools and districts to apply AVID in a targeted way that meets the needs of their specific students and communities.

Another important attribute of the Framework is its dynamic nature. The Framework is designed such that each of the three elements of college and career readiness (Rigorous Academic Preparedness, Opportunity Knowledge, and Student Agency) and the four adult behaviors (Insist on Rigor, Break Down Barriers, Align the Work, and Advocate for Students) are considered within the context of any or all of the four domains. In doing so, schools and districts can engage in specific, targeted areas of improvement or in schoolwide transformations, depending on areas of greatest need.

For example, a principal recognizing the need to ensure Rigorous Academic Preparedness would be most successful thinking about this work in the context of the current culture on her campus, what systems might be needed to monitor student course-taking patterns, the professional learning needed to increase rigorous instruction in all classrooms, and the leadership actions required to make this all happen.
Framework Components and Definitions

Four Domains of AVID

When AVID is implemented schoolwide with fidelity, it transforms the Instruction, Systems, Leadership, and Culture of a school, promoting college readiness for all students.

1. **Instruction**
   AVID Schoolwide instruction occurs when the entire instructional staff utilizes AVID strategies, other best instructional practices, and 21st century tools to ensure college readiness for AVID Elective students and improved academic performance for all students.

2. **Systems**
   AVID is Schoolwide when systems are in place that support governance, curriculum and instruction, data collection and analysis, professional learning, and student and parent outreach to ensure college readiness for AVID Elective students and improved academic performance for all students.

3. **Leadership**
   AVID Schoolwide leadership sets the vision and tone that promote college readiness and high expectations for all students in the school.

4. **Culture**
   AVID Schoolwide culture is evident when the AVID philosophy progressively shifts beliefs and behaviors resulting in an increase of students meeting college and career readiness requirements.

What Students Need

AVID students receive intentional support and mentoring in three major areas that help them become confident individuals who can successfully navigate life and career:

1. **Rigorous Academic Preparedness**
   Students have the academic skills and can successfully complete rigorous college and career preparatory curriculum and experiences.

2. **Opportunity Knowledge**
   Students research opportunities, set goals, make choices that support their long-term aspirations, and successfully navigate transitions to the next level.

3. **Student Agency**
   Students believe in and activate their own potential, build relationships, persist through obstacles, and exercise their academic, social, emotional, and professional knowledge and skills.

By placing students in a learning environment that engages them in rigor with support, affords opportunities to explore their future pathways, and provides deliberate instruction in self-management and leadership, they develop the agency and skills that will serve them throughout their lives. None of this is possible, however, if trusting relationships are not first established between adults and students. The development of student agency is particularly challenging unless students feel cared about, supported, and capable to successfully direct and take ownership of their futures. Establishing, nurturing, and maintaining meaningful relationships forms the basis for what is commonly referred to as the AVID family.9

What Educators Do

Teachers and other adults on a school campus play an important role in student success. AVID supports educators and transforms the learning environment into one where students are challenged, supported, and provided the tools needed to succeed. To do this, educators must:

1. **Insist on Rigor**
   Educators across the school provide learning experiences where every student is challenged, engaged, and develops a greater ownership in their learning through increasingly complex levels of understanding.

2. **Break Down Barriers**
   Educators are champions for equity who actively seek out and eliminate education barriers that would limit or restrict students’ access to meaningful and challenging learning opportunities.

3. **Align the Work**
   Educators increasingly align their practices and beliefs to the common purpose of preparing all students for college and career readiness as well as students’ long-term success in college, career, and life.

4. **Advocate for Students**
   Educators consistently advocate for equity and access to challenging coursework for all and help students find their voice and achieve their aspirations through creating strong relationships and providing appropriate guidance.
The Framework and College and Career Readiness

Performance on academic content is at the forefront of many definitions of college and career readiness, as evidenced by national standardized tests (e.g., the ACT® and SAT® standards and benchmarks) and many state definitions that focus almost exclusively on performance in academic courses and meeting benchmarks on state-mandated tests (e.g., see California and Texas). Instead, AVID’s philosophy of college and career readiness takes more of a comprehensive approach—one that includes not only academic content/knowledge but also incorporates other aspects of preparation and knowledge, such as those associated with college and career awareness and other non-cognitive skills and behaviors.

David Conley’s definition of college and career readiness is probably one of the most widely used and takes a comprehensive approach: “A college and career ready student possesses the content knowledge, strategies, skills, and techniques necessary to be successful in any of a range of postsecondary settings. Success is defined as the ability to complete entry-level courses at a level of performance that is sufficient to enable students to continue to the next courses in their chosen field of study. Not every student needs exactly the same knowledge and skills to be college and career ready (pp. 15–16).”

Conley asserts, and AVID agrees, that an overreliance on reading and math performance does not take the varying needs of individual students into consideration. Students differ in the knowledge and skills they possess and in what they will ultimately need to be successful after high school.

The National College Attainment Network (NCAN) acknowledges that most definitions of college and career readiness place an emphasis on students having different postsecondary aspirations. Because of the range of postsecondary opportunities that exist for students, states’ definitions of college and career readiness are beginning to include preparation in a variety of areas, including academic preparedness, critical thinking and problem-solving, social and emotional learning, communication and working in teams, community involvement and citizenship, grit, and perseverance.

AVID’s definition of a college- and career-ready student is one who possesses the confidence, academic skills, and relational skills needed to successfully navigate postsecondary experiences, career, and life. In other words, college readiness is the outcome of three critical elements: Rigorous Academic Preparedness, Opportunity Knowledge, and Student Agency.

The Framework and the Achievement Gap

The achievement gap refers to the persistent disparity in academic outcomes between different groups of students, typically White students and any other subgroup of minority students. Comparisons are also commonly made between low-income and higher-income student groups. The most common illustration of the achievement gap shows White students outperforming Hispanic and/or African American students using math, English vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension test scores as measures of achievement. Similar gaps have been identified between low- and higher-income groups, regardless of outcome measure used.

Decades of research on the achievement gap has done little to move the needle. It is our contention that the overreliance on test scores and the focus placed on student attributes and characteristics are significant reasons why. Coupled with the lack of attention paid to establishing trusting relationships in classrooms and developing agency and academic skills in students, it’s no wonder that progress has been slow. When the focus turns from learning “outputs” (student achievement scores) to teaching “inputs” (resources, experiences, and opportunities), one is forced to seek an explanation for our lack of progress in the system of schooling rather than the ethnicity and socioeconomic status of students.

From this perspective, student subgroup differences in achievement could be considered a product of inattention to “opportunity” and “expectation” gaps experienced during the learning process—the former reflecting the inequitable distribution or access to resources and supports, and the latter reflecting inequitable learning experiences due to adult personal biases, perceptions, and beliefs.
Using the graphic of the achievement gap above alongside the Framework, it’s possible to illustrate which components of the Framework address expectation and opportunity gaps. The four domains underlying the Framework provide structure, common language, and entry points for sometimes difficult discussions around observed inequities in the distribution of resources, access to quality instruction, and learning opportunities. Similarly, the extent to which educators model the four adult behaviors can indicate potential biases, perceptions, and beliefs that can then influence the growth or elimination of instructional, institutional, and intersegmental expectation gaps.

**Opportunity Gaps**

Opportunity gaps in education generally speak to the persistent disparity in access to high-quality teachers and schools, rigorous curriculum and instruction, and equitable access to academic support. Unlike the achievement gap, opportunity gaps refer to inputs—that which goes into the learning experience—that are inequitably distributed across student populations.

Research has shown that minority and low-income students are less likely to attend adequately resourced schools with highly qualified teachers than their Caucasian, middle- to upper-class peers. Moreover, students of color who do enroll in these institutions are often not afforded the same learning opportunities, academic supports, or resources needed to graduate college ready.

The four schoolwide domains of the Framework provide a platform and entry point for teachers and administrators to address opportunity gaps. For example, recognizing the need to arrange rigorous instruction to all students, a principal may provide professional learning opportunities to help their teachers learn to build the relational capacity and trust needed to activate students to believe in, advocate, and take responsibility for themselves. Here, the Framework gives purpose to the principal’s leadership action, made intentionally, to develop relational capacity in their staff, and ultimately, college and career readiness in all students at the school.
Expectation Gaps

**Instructional Expectation Gaps** can be defined as differentiated instruction based on belief systems that are grounded in the notion that some students are capable of more, and thus, expectations of their ability are held at a higher level than those thought to be less capable. As such, instruction becomes differentiated based on one’s beliefs of a student’s ability rather than objective evidence of a student’s potential.

Take for example a history teacher asking a Latino student the name of the individual who said, “Give me liberty or give me death!” before turning to a Caucasian student and asking, “Why do you think he said that?” The difference in the two questions can be classified by their level of difficulty, with the first being a low-level, fact-based question (Costa’s Level 1 or Bloom’s Knowledge level), and the second being a Level 2/3 question. According to Costa, Level 1 questions only require memorization of a name or date, while Level 2/3 questions often require synthesis, critical thinking, and higher-order reasoning. The difference in the teacher’s expectations of ability, which determined the level of rigor of the learning opportunity, resulted in what is referred to here as an *instructional expectation gap*.

AVID addresses these gaps by providing educators, as well as school and district leaders, with professional learning in culturally relevant teaching designed to bring awareness to cultural sensitivities and the influence that personal beliefs and expectations can have on instruction. AVID’s professional learning also incorporates a variety of inquiry-based teaching strategies (Socratic Seminar, Philosophical Chairs, Elbow Partners, etc.) that help minimize the influence of instructional bias by affording all students the same opportunity to learn and promoting personal ownership of one’s learning. In addition, professional learning around the use of AVID’s WICOR® strategies is designed to ensure that all students develop success skills necessary to engage, grapple with, and be successful in handling rigorous content.

**Institutional Expectation Gaps** can be defined as the policies, protocols, and practices espoused and adhered to by the institution (school or district) that allow access to high-level courses, support services, or other needed resources for some students but not others. Policies around prerequisite courses are good examples of an *institutional expectation gap*.

Imagine that your local high school has a policy that AP® courses are only available to students who have completed certain prerequisite courses. Even if a student has academic and/or aspirational potential, and a desire for the challenge of rigor, they are ultimately denied access to the AP course and are quickly enrolled in the less rigorous prerequisite in order to meet the expectation of the school’s policy. In this scenario, the school’s policy is likely more reflective of a biased belief system than one focused on the best interest of the student. Other examples of potential expectation gaps include restricting access to support services, limiting extracurricular activities to certain subgroups, and allocating funds based on something other than identified need. AVID addresses these gaps by bringing awareness to them through professional learning content strands, counseling, and administrator strands.

**Intersegmental Expectation Gaps** can be defined as the lack of understanding of the academic expectations between K–16 segments (i.e., elementary school, middle school, high school, and college/university). When instructional staff in the exit grade of an elementary school are uninformed about the expectations of the middle school standards, the likelihood that their students will have the requisite skills and content mastery needed to be successful is compromised. Vertical articulation between the various segments (including grade levels within a segment) is critical to ensure that intersegmental expectation gaps are eliminated, and students are set up for success and not failure.

In 2005, California adopted the California High School Exit Exam or CAHSEE, which all 12th graders were required to pass in order to earn a high school diploma. Curiously, after having received their diplomas, a significant portion of the state’s graduating class were not deemed eligible to enroll in the state university system, though each had passed the exit exam. As it turned out, the passing score on the exam certified a student eligible to exit the 12th grade, but a significant portion of those achieving the minimum passing score (350) failed to meet other requisite college entrance requirements, rendering them ineligible to enroll without taking non-credit-bearing, remedial courses. The difference between the exit criteria for grade 12 and the entrance criteria for grade 13 is what can be referred to as an *intersegmental expectation gap*. AVID addresses intersegmental gaps through AVID implementation coaching support, AVID District Leadership (ADL) trainings, administrator and counseling trainings, and a recommended feeder pattern implementation model.
AVID Impacts on System Inputs and Student Achievement

The Framework and implementation of AVID is situated within a school’s contexts/mechanisms of Instruction, Systems, Leadership, and Culture. Implementing AVID influences the professional landscape of school, particularly around courses of rigor. Recent data on high schools’ rigorous course offerings were gathered to determine if changes occurred as schools progressed in their implementation of AVID. These data, illustrated in the following graph, show that a majority of the high schools exhibited an increase in the portion of rigorous courses offered when measured in their first year of AVID implementation and then two years later once the school was officially certified as an AVID site.

Research shows that AVID also has an impact on rigorous course offerings at the middle school level. In some instances, implementation of AVID resulted in the addition of new courses or more course sections. In other instances, when funding hampers a school’s ability to make such additions, the impact of AVID is still evident: “The rigor and high standards of AVID permeate throughout the schools... Additionally, respondents noted how schools and districts have opened up access to advanced courses to all students by removing restrictions that previously limited enrollment to only certain types of students” (p. 31).

When students are held to high standards, are exposed to rigorous instruction, and can access appropriate academic and social supports, great things happen. In California, for example, there are usually large disparities in college preparedness/readiness, as measured by the completion of four-year college entrance requirements. However, when California’s statewide data is displayed next to AVID students’ data from California, we see that almost all AVID students, regardless of their race/ethnic background, are poised for college entrance. In addition, AVID’s impact on minimizing subgroup differences in achievement is evidenced when completion of college entrance requirements is used as an outcome measure.

Schools’ Portion of Rigorous Course Offerings by Year of AVID Implementation

![Graph showing the percentage of rigorous sections offered by year of implementation and year certified.](image)
When fully adopted, AVID has significant impacts on minimizing gaps in student achievement and college readiness, as indicated by students’ subsequent college outcomes. When compared to national data, AVID students across the nation enroll in college at similar or even higher rates than their peers, regardless of their race/ethnicity. Most impressive is the rate at which AVID students are enrolling in four-year colleges, particularly among African American and Hispanic students.

When broken out by ethnicity, the achievement gap for college entrance requirements is 4% for AVID graduates in California and 38% for the state overall.

*Other includes American Indian or Alaska Native students, Filipino, Pacific Islander, students of two or more races, and students who declined to state.

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**College Enrollment Rates at Two-Year and Four-Year Colleges by Ethnicity**

*Other includes Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native students, Filipino, Pacific Islander, students of two or more races, and students who declined to state. Percentages may not add up to total due to rounding.*
The graph above illustrates the long-term impact that AVID has on students’ grit and persistence. AVID students’ persistence into the second year of college outpaces the national average. Though a fully disaggregated national comparator is currently unavailable, AVID students’ outcomes across subgroups are very consistent. By focusing on system inputs and ensuring that all students have access to rigorous instruction with support, subgroup differences in achievement can be minimized and eliminated.

Conclusion

The AVID College and Career Readiness Framework provides a coherent, research-based, and efficacious model for minimizing achievement gaps and promoting college readiness for all students. By using a broad, system-centric perspective as a backdrop, the AVID College and Career Readiness Framework—theoretically derived and research-based—empowers educators to act in ways that promote equity and access.

Creating learning environments that challenge, support, and honor the contributions of all students is necessary for developing schoolwide and districtwide college and career readiness. Still, even that’s not enough. Building relational capacity between students and teachers has proven to be the active ingredient necessary to bring the AVID experience together in promoting trust, academic risk-taking, and the belief in oneself that “I too can be successful.”

What makes AVID unique among educational frameworks is the intentionality and commitment of AVID educators insisting on rigor, breaking down barriers to success, aligning the work, and advocating for students until they can advocate for themselves. None of these alone can accomplish the intended goal without strong and trusting relationships between students and adults.

Over four decades, we have seen student outcomes improve. In addition to graduating more college-bound and career-ready students, schools are equipping them with the social and emotional faculties that they need for life and career success.

Curious how your school or district could leverage this Framework?

AVID is here to help you strategize how to best unlock your students’ and educators’ potential and ensure that all students at your school or district are college and career ready. Call (833) 284-3227 or email AVIDCare@avid.org for more information.
References


