

Advancement Via Individual Determination: Project AVID

Minority students are attending college with the help of a program now implemented in 58 secondary schools in San Diego County, California.

My parents do not speak English. My older brothers and sister dropped out of school. I am the first person in my family to attend college. I am in the School of Engineering at the University of California because I was able to earn a 3.7 grade point average in advanced courses in high school through the AVID program. I now tutor current AVID students in the skills that have helped me so much.

—An AVID graduate

Project AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) is a four-year elective high school program that prepares underachieving, disadvantaged students to attend college. AVID began in 1980 at Clairemont High School in San Diego. At that time, state universities in the area were enrolling very few minority students. Disturbed by this inequity, educators from Clairemont and several local universities met to brainstorm ways to increase minority enrollment in college. They soon decided to focus on improving the target students' skills at the high school level.

What the Program Provides

Under the four-year AVID program, minority or economically disadvantaged students enroll in a single class, AVID, where they receive direct writing instruction from a language arts teacher. They also enroll in the high school's regular advanced courses to

prepare for university eligibility. AVID students receive tutorial assistance in all academic areas. AVID employs successful students from local universities as tutors.

To further develop students' language skills, teachers in all subject areas throughout the school use writing-to-learn in their classrooms. Students take notes daily from class lectures and textbooks. From these notes, they develop conceptual questions about what they understand or don't understand in their classes. They then discuss these questions in the subject-area tutorial groups in the AVID class.

AVID students receive tutorial assistance in all academic areas.

In four years, writing-to-learn has helped students raise their mean grade point average from 2.2 (in general track classes) to 3.2 (in college preparatory classes).

Under the guidance of the AVID coordinator, the site teachers meet regularly to discuss curriculum, share teaching strategies, and address problems unique to their environments. The AVID counselor monitors students' preparation for college and conducts special seminars to help students complete college applications and financial aid forms. The universities provide speakers on academic survival skills, coordinate field trips to their campuses, and give access to campus events.

Members of the community participate, too. Local businesspeople talk to students about career opportunities and provide summer jobs to give students a better understanding of the doors they could open by earning college degrees.

Tangible Results

What has AVID achieved? Of the first six classes that the Clairemont project has graduated, 178 of 181 AVID students enrolled in colleges, 89 percent in four-year institutions, and 11 percent in community colleges.¹ At San Diego State University, the cumulative

grade point average of the first six classes was 2.46; the freshman average was 1.9.² At the University of California at San Diego, AVID graduates earned a

cumulative average of 2.47, while the overall freshman average was 2.83.³

The AVID program has benefited not just the enrolled students, but

Clairemont High School as a whole. The number of advanced-level course sections has doubled. On the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills, scores in Total Language have risen 47 percent in three years, compared to the district gain of 17 percent; scores in Total Math have risen 35 percent, compared to the district gain of 13 percent. Clairemont ranks fourth in the district in the number of graduates enrolled full-time in college, surpassed only by three schools whose students are primarily of high socioeconomic status.⁴

Ambassadors: Models for At-Risk Students

Peggy Cahoon

Created in March 1988 as a partnership between Ferron Elementary School and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, the Ambassador Program pairs university students with at-risk students to serve as role models. The university students, called Ambassadors, meet weekly with our elementary students to help them improve their social and academic skills and develop positive attitudes toward self and work.

There were not enough Ambassadors to work with all the students who needed their attention, so we had to be selective about which students could participate. We started the program in grades 4 and 5 with students who met our definition of at-risk students: children having difficulty fulfilling their potential due to circumstances not of their own making. Our goals included that students would improve their reading and math grades, their attendance, and their problem-solving skills; that students' self-esteem would be enhanced; that parents would become more involved in their children's education; and that the school would become more sensitive to the needs of the families of at-risk children.

When I described the program to the first group of students selected, they responded with enthusiasm; and all their parents, when informed, accepted our invitations that their children participate in the program.

Many Ambassadors grew up with the same hardships our students are now facing; in fact, several came from the same neighborhoods. By sharing their own success stories with the younger students, the Ambassadors conveyed that adversity can be overcome with effort. At the beginning of their work, each Ambassador received a folder created for his or her charge, which contained the parent's permission slip; information from the teacher about the child's area(s) of concern (math or reading difficulties, attendance, social problems); forms on which to record what transpired during each session; and math, reading, and social activities for the student to complete.

During the sessions, held from 1:00 to 2:30 every Thursday, the Ambassadors talked with their students about the week's successes, discussed any academic or social problems, and reviewed their weekly progress reports and completed assignments. They allotted time for practicing math, working on assignments, and helping students organize their work for home-study. The Ambassadors gave the students their home phone numbers and often initiated contact with their parents to suggest ways to help the children at home or to arrange outings after school hours.

To further create positive attitudes about getting an education and to emphasize the importance of staying in school and working to their potential, we arranged for our at-risk students to tour the university campus with their Ambassadors. This experience, a "first" for them, generated much excitement.

At the end of the first year, the 22 student participants felt the venture had helped them improve their grades and attitudes about school. Warm friendships had developed between the university students and their charges, and many students asked if the Ambassadors could come more frequently. Enthusiastic about their students' progress, the teachers requested that the program be continued the next year. Parental involvement also increased.

We are now in our second year. We are establishing more direct contact with parents of students who might benefit from the program. Certificates, progress reports, and many other school communications are being translated into Spanish. So that more Ferron students can participate, we are also enlisting additional Ambassadors: high school students, more university students, and volunteers from the community. At Ferron Elementary School, the Ambassador Program is assisting us in our daily struggle to break the cycle of failure of yet another generation.

Peggy Cahoon is Principal, William E. Ferron Elementary School, 4200 Mountain Vista, Las Vegas, NV 89121.

Reinforcing Benefits

Involving all segments of the community in the classroom enriches the experience of the students and puts the responsibility for education where it belongs: on the entire community. It is the community that either benefits or suffers from the results of the educational process, just as the community creates the attitudes and environment that spell success, failure, or mediocrity. Programs like AVID benefit both individual students and their communities, and these benefits reinforce each other. □

1. San Diego Unified Schools Research Department, "Report on the Status of Graduates of the Class of 1987: Six Months After Their Graduation." Reports for 1980-1986.

2. San Diego State University, Office of Institutional Research.

3. University of California, San Diego, Research-Undergraduate Division, University of California, San Diego, "Summary of First Year Performance for Freshmen Entering Fall Quarter," 1980-1986.

4. San Diego Unified Schools Research Department.

Author's note: In 1985 the AVID project was designated a National Center of Excellence by the National Council of Teachers of English. In 1986 the project was funded for dissemination by California Assembly Bill 2321 and the San Diego County Office of Education, allowing publication of a comprehensive AVID Handbook, an AVID Curriculum Guide, and training materials. AVID is currently being implemented in 58 secondary schools in San Diego County.

Mary Catherine Swanson is AVID Founder and Coordinator of Instructional Support Services, San Diego County Office of Education, 6401 Linda Vista Rd., Rm. 405, San Diego, CA 92111-7399.

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