

Albert Shanker

The former AFT president led the charge to defend public education by improving it. A new biography tells the story.

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Focusing on Academic Intensity and the Road to College Success

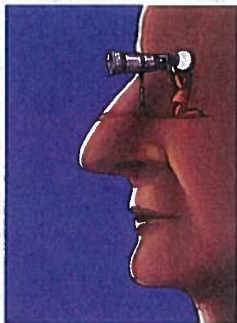
Eight years ago, Clifford Adelman, then a senior researcher with the U.S. Department of Education, published a striking finding—high school students’ “academic resources” (a combination of high school curriculum, score on an SAT-like test, and class rank) have a greater impact on completing a bachelor’s degree than socioeconomic status.

His study, *Answers in the Tool Box*, made news and a couple of its key findings—such as the importance of taking challenging academic courses and, in particular, taking a math class beyond Algebra II—even seeped into popular culture.

Last year, Adelman published *The Toolbox Revisited*, using more recent data, and reconfirmed the importance of academic resources for completing (not just entering) college. Here’s how he summed up the key points: “Two national longitudinal studies, a decade apart, have told similar stories. When the second story reinforces the first—and sheds even more light—something has to be right, and it behooves us to pay attention. Both of them provide support for current efforts to improve the quality of high school curricula and the participation in those curricula of ever larger proportions of students.”

Pay attention we will—starting with a closer look at the impact of students’ socioeconomic status versus their academic resources. After breaking both variables into quintiles and doing some sophisticated analyses, Adelman determined that for each step up in socioeconomic status, the probability of earning a bachelor’s degree goes up by about seven percent—but for each step up in academic resources, the probability of earning a bachelor’s degree goes up by about 15 percent.

As in the previous study, Adelman dug a little further. Unpacking the academic resources data, he found that of the three factors (high school curriculum, score on an SAT-like test, and class rank), the intensity and quality of the high school curriculum is the most important. More specifically, curriculum reflects 42 percent of the academic resources students bring to higher education; score on an SAT-like test reflects 25 percent; and class rank/GPA reflects 33 percent.



It’s one thing to know that an academically intense curriculum is important—it’s another to see what it looks like. By studying students’ high school transcripts, Adelman devised an intensity scale with 31 levels. Those at the top level had earned at least the following:

- 3.75 or more Carnegie units of English
- 3.75 or more Carnegie units of mathematics
- highest mathematics of calculus, precalculus, or trigonometry
- 2.5 or more Carnegie units of science or more than 2.0 Carnegie units of core laboratory science (biology, chemistry, and physics)
- more than 2.0 Carnegie Units of foreign languages
- more than 2.0 Carnegie Units of history and social studies
- 1.0 or more Carnegie Units of computer science
- more than one Advanced Placement course

In addition, they had no remedial English or math courses. This is a high-powered transcript—and it paid off: 95 percent of the students who reached this top level on the intensity scale earned a bachelor’s degree within eight years of high school graduation.

Providing students the opportunity to take and succeed in such courses is obviously critical. So how do we do it? That’s the million-dollar question. Many schools, generally in poor areas, don’t even offer the most advanced courses—often because they can’t find an adequate supply of math and science teachers. But even where they do, they still face the enormous challenge of helping more students complete them. Not all kids have the necessary background knowledge, study skills, or preparation.

AVID, a program founded by an English teacher nearly 30 years ago, may help. The following pages share the founder’s story. They also detail AVID’s simple, yet effective structure by featuring one high school’s experience with AVID.

—EDITORS

Focusing on the Forgotten

How to Put More Kids on the Track to College Success

By Jennifer Jacobson

Not long ago, Cesar Moran was more concerned with hanging out with his friends than making good grades. His parents, Mexican immigrants, did not go to college. His father works in construction, his mother, in an office that sells wallpaper. Although they always reminded Cesar to do his homework and wanted him to attend college, they couldn't exactly help him with either. So he had little academic support at home.

Cesar is the very kind of student—an under-achiever in need of challenging courses—that education researcher Clifford Adelman is talking about. As explained in the editors' note (p.29), Adelman has found that the intensity of a student's high school curriculum is the most important precollegiate factor in earning a college degree. Based on that finding, what to do seems obvious: Assign virtually all students to honors, Advanced Placement (AP), and other college-prep courses. But how to do it is not so obvious: Without the right kind of support, many students would fail these classes.

Take Cesar, for instance. He wasn't necessarily a bad student or a troublemaker. He just didn't push himself to study—until somebody did. And he didn't have the background knowledge or study skills that advanced courses require—until somebody taught them to him. That person, of course, was a teacher. An AVID teacher.

In his sophomore year, Cesar enrolled in Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), a program that seeks to expose average students to rigorous courses that will prepare them for college. Students aren't thrown into

honors or Advanced Placement classes, and left to sink or swim. Rather, they receive a variety of instructional supports, including tutors and note-taking strategies, to help them succeed.

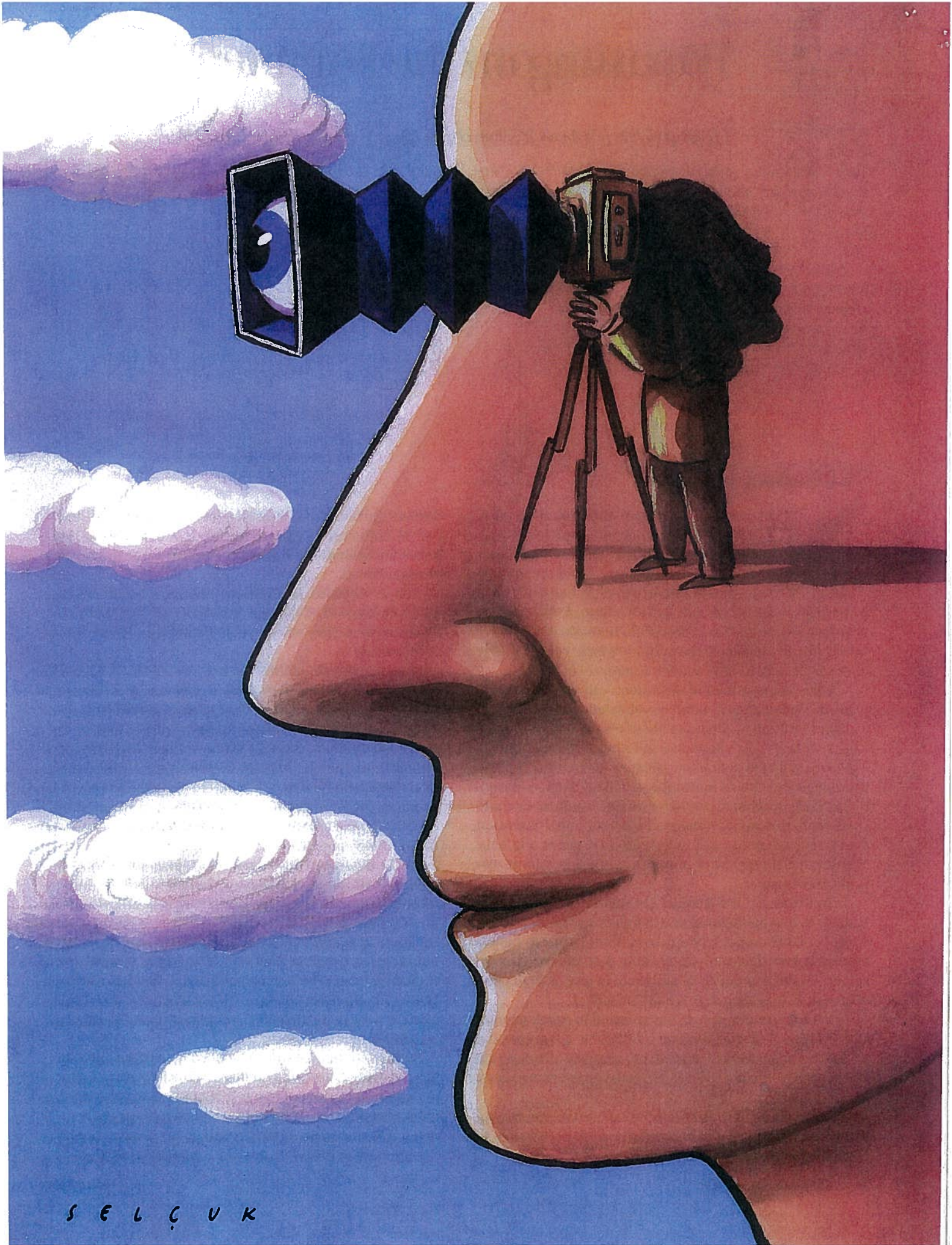
While Adelman's research pinpoints what students need to succeed in college, it doesn't provide a concrete framework to implement such knowledge. That's where AVID comes in.

The program's hallmarks are exceedingly practical. AVID provides students with a teacher who regularly checks their work in all of their classes, works with them daily to improve their writing and study skills, and, so they don't fall behind, stays in close contact with students' content area teachers. Most importantly, AVID students must take responsibility for their own education. AVID requires them to challenge themselves, and not simply coast through easy classes; they must take at least one AP or honors class each year.

AVID is not an intervention program for at-risk kids who may drop out of school or end up in jail. It's for that often overlooked kid in the middle, who is bright and has great potential. It's for students who would be the first in their family to attend college, but who never dreamed they could do so because they didn't have the grades or the money. AVID is also for teachers striving to reach the Cesar Morans in their classrooms. It's for teachers who want to expand access to higher level classes to more students, regardless of race or class.

Now more than ever, students need a college degree to land a good job and enjoy a quality life. But for some, higher education remains out of reach. The application process is confusing and daunting for kids whose parents never went through it themselves. AVID, though, gives these students the support structure that more advantaged kids already

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have. And, says Mary Catherine Swanson, AVID's founder, it provides someone to believe in them, someone to say, "I know you're smart. I know you can do this."

Opening Doors

At Clairemont High School in San Diego, a prestigious, high-scoring school with a well-to-do student body, Swanson became that someone. In 1980, she served as the chairwoman of Clairemont's English department. That year, in response to court-ordered desegregation, low-income, minority students were bused to the school. Swanson did not want them to be tracked into less rigorous courses and to graduate with fewer doors, professional and academic, open to them.

A longtime teacher, she had taught both honors students and those who struggled to read. She had chosen teaching over a career in journalism because she loved literature and wanted to make a difference in children's lives. But upon learning that those new students from less rigorous schools would transfer to her own school, she wondered what would happen to them. Many would be kids in-between, students with average or below-average grades and basic skills who wanted to attend college but didn't know how.

Swanson recruited these students to enroll in a new program she created: AVID. She did this by talking to counselors at inner-city middle schools who knew of eighth-graders who would be attending Clairemont in the fall and who earned mainly Cs, had few or no discipline problems, attended school regularly, and qualified for free or reduced-price meals.

Swanson explained to the counselors, students, and their parents that she would teach them in a 50-minute classroom period each day, called the AVID elective. In that class, she and a handful of tutors (local college students) would improve AVID students' note-taking, organizational, and study skills by intensely focusing on reading and writing. The rest of the day the AVID students—there were roughly 30 of them that first year—would take their core classes with the rest of the student body. One or two of those classes would be honors or Advanced Placement, in which AVID students would be supported thanks to the AVID elective.

The program became so successful at graduating these students and helping them enroll in college that in 1986, the San Diego County Office of Education hired Swanson to disseminate AVID throughout the county. In 1995, AVID went national. Swanson founded the AVID Center, a non-profit organization, to implement the program across the country. It now operates in more than 3,500 schools in 45 states and 15 countries, with nearly 250,000 students enrolled in the AVID elective.

Swanson incorporated an intense focus on writing into AVID because the very act of putting words on paper provides students with the analytical tools that will prepare them for college. "Writing," Swanson says in *Wall of Fame*, a book on the history of AVID, "is a core skill that is used

"Writing is a core skill that is used in every step of the learning process, from note-taking to study questions to analysis to essay writing. The constant, comprehensive, and very demanding use of writing in AVID forces students to absorb what they read and hear and distill it in their own words."

—Mary Catherine Swanson

in every step of the learning process, from note-taking to study questions to analysis to essay writing. The constant, comprehensive, and very demanding use of writing in AVID forces students to absorb what they read and hear and distill it in their own words. And when students have to read each other's run-on sentences, garbled phrases, and interminable paragraphs, peers become tough editors, demanding simplicity, clarity, and structure" (Freedman, 2002).

Today, the AVID elective has a well-structured curriculum that focuses on writing. AVID students learn how to take "Cornell notes," which teaches them how to analyze and synthesize a text and then summarize what they've read. They must also keep a three-inch, three-ring binder to help them organize all their assignments.

AVID programs exist in both middle and high schools. But high schools can adopt AVID without having their feeder middle schools offer the program. In middle schools that do use AVID, students learn the basics of Cornell note-taking and, through writing, to hone their thinking skills, says Mark Wolfe, AVID's national director of curriculum. They learn how to write a good summary and to identify and write a thesis statement. They also learn how to prepare an essay. In high school, students focus on spe-

cific writing styles, such as persuasive writing, and how to collect and cite sources.

The curriculum is structured so that the lessons allow teachers to differentiate instruction, Wolfe says. For each lesson there's a foundational, an intermediate, and an advanced level. During AVID workshops, teachers are trained to identify at which level they need to teach each of their students.

The AVID curriculum also focuses on preparing students for the college application process and prompts them to start thinking about their interests in future careers. While middle school students learn economic life lessons, such as how to balance a budget, and begin thinking about what kind of colleges to attend, juniors in high school actually investigate their colleges of choice and begin applying for scholarships.

AVID also provides training materials for the AVID tutors. These guide tutors on how to work with students and what kinds of questions to ask them to make sure they're learning. Additionally, AVID has developed a set of books in English, math, science, and social studies for content area teachers. The books focus on how to teach writing in that particular subject.

San Antonio's Solution

Just as AVID teaches students how to structure their writing, it also shows them how to manage their time by structuring their day. AVID students at Thomas A. Edison High School in San Antonio thrive on that structure. On a Tuesday in March, they look alert and hard at work in both their AVID elective and Advanced Placement classes. They read, write, and take notes, and fully engage with the material in front of them.

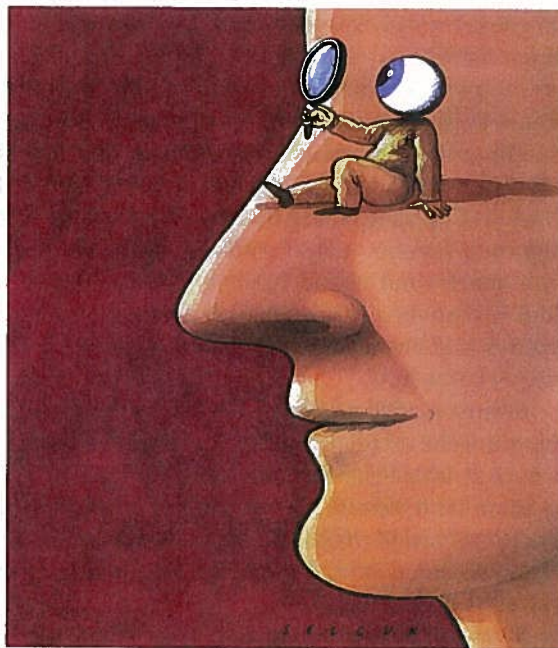
Dalia Johnston sets the tone for such behavior. For a little more than a year, she has served as the school's AVID coordinator and elective teacher. Previously, she had taught English at Edison for five years. Nearly 100 percent of the school's students are Hispanic and eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals. Roughly 150 students in the 1,500-student school are enrolled in AVID, which began at Edison a decade ago.

Low student achievement throughout San Antonio's high schools prompted the superintendent at the time to hire a slew of new principals and send them to San Diego to learn about AVID. San Diego's population, a significant percentage of which was low-income and largely Hispanic, mirrored the district's own. The San Antonio principals, impressed with what they had learned, gave the superintendent the green light to implement AVID.

Rudy Martinez was Edison's first AVID coordinator. For eight years, he ran the school's program. Then, nearly two years ago, the AVID Center recruited him to be the assistant director of its central division. He says he chose Johnston as his replacement because she cared about kids as much as he did.

When Johnston first arrived at Edison in 2002, Martinez encouraged her to attend the AVID Center's summer

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institute, in which teachers spend an entire week learning how to implement AVID strategies, such as teaching students how to take Cornell notes, organize their binders, and improve their writing. After the institute, Johnston found the strategies useful and began implementing them in her English class. When Martinez approached her about succeeding him as AVID coordinator, she jumped at the opportunity. "These kids unfortunately don't have anyone at home to tell them how to go about going on to college," she says. "I felt like I was going to have the time to talk to the students about life."

To recruit them, Johnston works with AVID's site team at the school. The eight-member team, made up of Johnston, five content area teachers, an administrator, and a counselor, meets every nine weeks (and communicates weekly by e-mail) to discuss the program and identify potential students. Johnston also meets with teachers in Edison's feeder middle schools to find students who would be a good match for the program—students who earn mostly Bs and Cs and would be the first in their families to attend college. Johnston and the site team interview students to determine if they have the individual motivation to succeed.

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When Challenged, Average Kids Succeed

In both *Answers in the Toolbox* and *The Toolbox Revisited* (see p. 29), Adelman urged policymakers to use his findings to help more students complete bachelor's degrees by ensuring the intensity and quality of the high school curriculum. As he wrote in *Answers to the Toolbox*, it "is the only component of pre-college preparation that we can do something about, the only component in which everybody can be at the top—provided a) that they have the opportunity-to-learn and b) that they take advantage of the opportunity."

AVID certainly provides that opportunity. Although the program has been evaluated only to a modest extent, AVID's own data indicate that it's quite successful.* As of last year, 94 percent of students who completed AVID had enrolled in college, 77 percent at a four-year college and 17 percent at a two-year college. AVID's four-year college-going rate is more than double the national average of 35 percent. AVID's success with minority students is also compelling. Latino AVID graduates attend four-year colleges at almost two times the national average. And its African-

American graduates do so at one and a half times the national average.

Unfortunately, there are no data on the number of AVID graduates who actually earn four-year degrees. But researchers have studied AVID graduates' retention rates in college, at least in the short-term. According to one study, after two years, 89 percent of the AVID students in one four-year university were still enrolled and on track to graduate—a retention rate that well exceeded the college average (Mehan et al., 1996).

A study by Texas researchers found that AVID also contributes to overall school improvement (Watt et al., 2006). The study examined 10 high schools that had received federal grants to implement AVID in the fall of 1999. The researchers followed these 10 schools, which were in five districts, over four years. Compared to schools without AVID, the AVID high schools had improved their accountability ratings substantially. Using Texas' terminology, three of the 10 schools went from "low-performing" in 1999 to "acceptable" in 2002. Two schools went from "acceptable" to "exemplary," two schools went from "acceptable" to "recognized,"

and three schools remained "acceptable" from 1999 to 2002. None of the AVID high schools' accountability ratings dropped in the four-year period, and none are now classified as "low-performing." The study notes that these changes occurred after two or three years of the program—not right away. In comparison, the high schools without AVID increased their accountability ratings, on average, but only slightly. Only two of the schools went from "acceptable" to "recognized," and one dropped from "acceptable" to "low-performing."

—J.J.

*It also has more evidence of its effectiveness than two widely known federal programs developed to help disadvantaged students prepare for college: Upward Bound and GEAR UP. For example, an evaluation of Upward Bound found that it had limited or no effect on total high school credits or grades and no effect on the college-going rates of the average participant. It did, however, increase the four-year college going rates of students who, when they began the program, did not expect to earn a bachelor's degree (Myers et al., 2004). GEAR UP fares a little better: Recent research indicates that GEAR UP increases students' knowledge of, and desire to attend, college—but it is not as effective as AVID in increasing students' enrollment in advanced courses, a factor that previous research has found is strongly related to completing college (Watt et al., 2007).

Think AVID Might Be Right for Your School?

Contact one of AVID's regional offices and then attend an AVID "awareness session" to learn about AVID's core strategies, known as WICR (writing, inquiry, collaboration, and reading), as well as AVID's 11 essentials, which include voluntary participation on the part of students and teachers, scheduling the AVID elective class during the regular school day, and submission of AVID student achievement data to the AVID Center. Next, visit an AVID school to see the program in action.

Implementing AVID takes about a year. A school must form a site team, made up of content area

teachers, the AVID coordinator, an administrator, and a counselor. The site team must attend AVID's summer institute to develop an implementation plan, and learn how to identify and recruit students and tutors. Then in the fall, the school enrolls its first AVID class.

All this, of course, costs money. Schools must pay a membership fee to consult with the AVID regional offices and receive newsletters and other publications. The summer institute costs \$4,760, not including travel and lodging. The AVID curriculum and other materials cost \$4,500 for high schools and \$4,000 for middle schools. Along with the

program's other features, including professional development, the total cost of adopting AVID approaches nearly \$20,000 annually.

Once schools have offered the program for several years, they can apply to become AVID national demonstration sites, of which there are about 100. (In San Antonio, Edison High School is one.) The recognition signals that a school has implemented a college-going culture and expanded AVID strategies, such as Cornell notes, school-wide, and has done an outstanding job engaging parents and recruiting students.

—J.J.

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Helping Students Help Themselves

It's clear from the way she has decorated her classroom that Johnston wants them to sustain that motivation. A sign saying, "AVID ALL-STARS," hangs above the doorway. Pennants from Arizona State University, St. Mary's University, and Southwest Texas University line the walls. Johnston has also posted students' college acceptance letters on a bulletin board that says "College Corner."

On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, Johnston teaches the AVID curriculum to her two freshmen sections, one sophomore, one junior, and one senior section. As of the spring, she was teaching about 50 freshmen, 35 sophomores, 34 juniors, and 25 seniors. Students must take the AVID elective for at least three years. Johnston attributes the attrition rate to students moving or deciding they don't want to take more rigorous courses. In those, she emphasizes, AVID can only help students who want to continue to help themselves.

Johnston assigns each class work that is appropriate for that particular grade. For instance, this spring her freshmen had been researching college admission requirements and the application process, while her juniors were writing research papers on how leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Muhammad Ali, and Gandhi changed society.

Each Friday Johnston tries to invite guest speakers, such as former Edison AVID students now in college, while Tuesdays and Thursdays are tutorial days. On a Tuesday in March, Johnston walks a visitor around her classroom. Instead of individual desks, there are tables with different signs on them. One says science another says English, another math, another social studies, and another electives. Students must sit at the table with the sign of the subject they have chosen to work on that day.

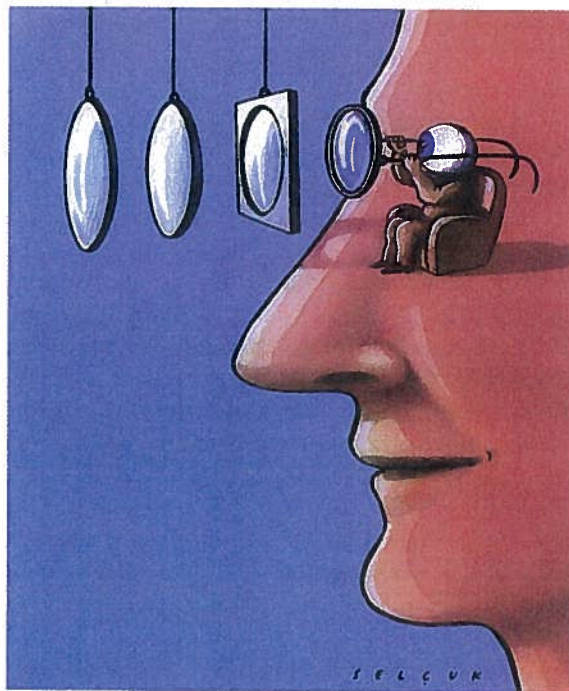
On a tutorial day, the AVID tutor collects a paper from students detailing what subject and which assignment they will work on. The class is more than a structured study hall. During each 50-minute tutorial, "the students need to acquire a new piece of information," Johnston says. To that end, she and the tutor walk around the room to check in with students to see if they need extra support. Students also help each other.

At the math table, Paul Garcia, a junior, sits hunched over a sheet of pre-calculus problems. As he puzzles over how to solve them, he asks his classmate, David Montemayor, "What are you doing after school?" David, looking up from his work, says, "Need help?" Paul says yes.

At the English table, Anabel Gonzales, a junior, sits reading *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* for her AP English class. "Right now, we're focusing on affirmative action," she says.

"Do you want some gum, Miss?" Anabel asks a few seconds later, pulling a pack from her bag. Johnston politely says no thank you. The atmosphere in the tutorial may be a bit informal and relaxed, but Anabel's schedule this year is anything but. In addition to the AVID elective and AP English, she's also taking AP math and AP U.S. History.

Johnston keeps close track of her students. She regularly checks their binders and gives them progress reports every three weeks. Johnston also talks to her students' AP teachers daily so the students don't fall through the cracks.



Convincing the Skeptics

To make sure Anabel and the rest of the AVID students keep up with their AP coursework, Johnston keeps close track of her students. She regularly checks their binders and gives them progress reports every three weeks. Johnston also talks to her students' AP teachers daily so the students don't fall through the cracks.

Not long ago, such dialogue between AVID teachers and those who taught AP was rare. At many schools—including Clairemont High, where Mary Catherine Swanson founded the program nearly three decades ago—relations between the two groups were not always smooth. Carol Frausto, the AVID coordinator for the San Antonio Independent School

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AVID

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District, remembers how AP teachers initially resisted having the program's students placed in their classes. "They felt they were not ready," she says.

At first, AP teacher Michelle LaFontaine was skeptical. The 20-year veteran teacher recalls that when the program began at Edison, she doubted that AVID students could handle college-prep material and that their analytical skills would be strong enough. After all, history is more than the memorization of facts and dates. Students must put historical events in context and understand the complexities of human nature.

In fact, AVID students are not weaker than the other students, La Fontaine says. Some of them, she says, work harder and are more organized. She requires her students to keep a binder, which AVID students already have. And she says AVID students benefit greatly from Johnston's help because as an English teacher, Johnston can hone their writing skills, crucial for any student of history.

LaFontaine says her AP U.S. History class requires a lot more homework than the regular history class at Edison, maybe eight to 10 hours a week. But the heavier load has not stopped AVID students from rising to the challenge. LaFontaine recalls that last year, one AVID student transferred into her AP class three weeks into the fall semester, even though she'd be starting behind. LaFontaine asked

AP teachers emphasize that they do not alter their teaching to accommodate AVID students.

"I've got my standards," says Terry Byers, an AP economics teacher at Edison. "They've got to come up to that."



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the student why she wanted to take the class. "I really think I can do it," the student told her. She had seen her AVID peers doing the work and she wanted to try it, too. LaFontaine says the student did fine. "She learned a lot more history than she would have had she stayed in a regular class."

AP teachers emphasize that they do not alter their teaching to accommodate AVID students. "I've got my standards," says Terry Byers, an AP economics teacher at Edison. "They've got to come up to that."

And they do, thanks to a good dose of positive peer pressure. Typically, it's not cool for kids to be smart, but in AVID "they get on each other's case if they don't get their work done," Johnston says. Such encouragement has helped AVID students surpass teachers' expectations. "Some of the kids that have passed the AP test are surprising in that I would not have pegged them," Byers says. "They weren't at the top of their class."

Still, getting AVID students to do well on AP tests is no small task. While the number of students in the district taking AP classes has increased, due to AVID, from 228 in 1995 to 1,822 in 2006, only 344 students (11.4 percent) earned a 3, 4, or 5 on AP exams, scores that earn them college credit. Increasing scores is "one thing we do have to work on," Johnston says. But even if they don't get at least a 3, "the rigor that they had to go through to prepare for that test will better prepare them for college. Just having gone through the process is an achievement in and of itself"

Research supports Johnston's claim that students are better off having taken challenging courses, even if they

don't achieve top grades in those classes. In fact, *Answers in the Toolbox* and *The Toolbox Revisited* (see p. 29) found that high school curriculum is more important for college completion than either standardized test scores or GPA. What this means is that it's better for students to take rigorous courses and do average work in them than to take regular courses and do well. In other words, it's better for a high school junior to take pre-calculus and earn a C than to take a lower-level math, such as Algebra II, and earn a B. Ultimately, it's fine for kids to struggle in AP courses; it's that very struggle that will better prepare them for college (Adelman, 2007).

"You Can't Be a Follower All Your Life"

After all, there's more to AVID than high test scores. Just ask Cesar Moran. A 2006 graduate of Edison, Cesar enrolled in AVID as a sophomore and is now at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Twice a week he returns to Edison to work as an AVID tutor. If not for the program, Cesar says he probably would not have enrolled in college. But staying in AVID was tough. At one point, he wanted to quit.

Cesar told Edison's AVID coordinator at the time, Rudy Martinez, that he was dropping the program. Martinez remembers the conversation like it was yesterday. Cesar, he says, was friends with two brothers who initially asked him to join them in AVID. But in their junior year, the brothers didn't want to take AP classes for fear of earning low grades that would make them ineligible to play on the basketball team. In Texas, if students don't pass, they don't play. When the brothers dropped AVID, Cesar wanted to leave, too. "You can't be a follower all your life," Martinez told him. "You can do better than this."

After his talk with Martinez, Cesar says he thought to himself, "How am I going to get into college?" He didn't know. So he decided to stay in AVID. As for his friends who dropped out, they're not in college, he says. They work at a warehouse doing manual labor. □

Article and Sidebar

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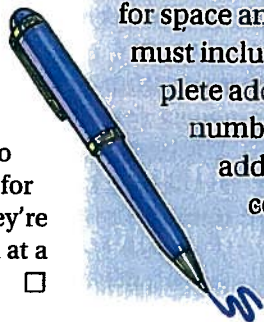
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