AYPF Forum Brief

The AVID College Readiness System: A Discussion of Comprehensive Strategies for Student Success

June 21, 2013

<u>Overview</u>

According to the current body of research, less than one half of students who aspire to attend college are academically qualified for postsecondary success. Among minority populations, the rate is significantly higher. To address the knowledge and skills gap faced by today's youth, AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), a national non-profit organization affecting more than 700,000 students in 46 states, has developed the AVID College Readiness System (ACRS). The ACRS aims to accelerate student learning by providing direct support to first-generation college-goers and high-quality professional development for teachers, using research-based methods of effective instruction.

This forum provided an in-depth look at the AVID College Readiness System and its impact on K-12 systems and higher education institutions. The forum examined the successful implementation of ACRS in three school districts: Pinellas County (FL) Schools, Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools, and Fairfax City (VA) Public Schools. Through individual presentations, a moderated discussion, and a question-and-answer session, the panel members provided an on-the-ground perspective about the AVID approach to changing cultures within both schools and school districts. Panelists also discussed the role of federal, state, and local policy in supporting and improving K-12 education, as well as in enhancing students' transitions from secondary to postsecondary education.

Forum speakers included Rob Gira, Executive Vice President, Quality, Communications & Research, AVID National Center; Dr. Michael Grego, Superintendent, Pinellas County School Board; Dr. Peter Noonan, Superintendent, Fairfax City Public Schools; Derek Steele, AVID Program District Director, College Success Program, Fairfax County Public Schools; and Cindy Zavala, AVID Alumna, Junior, American University.

<u>Presentations</u>

This forum discussed the key features of the AVID College Readiness System and highlighted the implementation of the approach in three school districts. Panelists shared their perspectives based on their first-hand experiences as staff developers, principals, and superintendents. The forum also featured a student who had participated in local AVID program during high school.

Rob Gira, Executive Vice President of Quality, Communications & Research at the AVID National Center, started the forum by giving an overview of AVID and the ACRS. In setting the stage and providing a context for the panel discussion, Gira emphasized that AVID is a schoolwide system that offers a highly structured approach to improving school cultures. "There is too much randomness on our campuses. The AVID system, in contrast, serves entire communities. Our work is grounded in four concepts: leadership, systems, instruction and culture. We want to create on-ramps for students," he explained.

According to Gira, the ACRS is designed to increase the number of students, particularly those from low-income and minority families, who enroll in four-year colleges and succeed in higher education. Under the ACRS, participating students in elementary school participate in AVID Elementary, a school-wide readiness system; middle and high school students grades 6-12 take the AVID elective class; and through a recently launched pilot program, colleges and universities put AVID practices in place through AVID for Higher Education. At the heart of the system are proven methodologies based on WICOR: <u>W</u>riting to learn; emphasis on <u>I</u>nquiry; <u>C</u>ollaborative approach; <u>O</u>rganizational skills; and critical <u>R</u>eading. Gira explained that the AVID system is delivered to students by teachers who are trained and coached in implementing AVID strategies for building a college-going and college-success culture.

Gira continued his presentation by highlighting the role professional development plays in the implementation of AVID. Explaining AVID's foundations as a teacher-based program helps guide the AVID approach. "Teacher leadership is huge piece of what we do. The AVID site tem is an important concept. The professional development and leadership pieces of AVID are key because we ask a lot of educators," he said.

AVID serves an estimated 700,000 students in more than 4,900 elementary, middle and high schools, as well as 28 postsecondary institutions in 46 states and 16 countries or territories. According to data collected by AVID, more than 98 percent of AVID high school seniors graduate from high school, and more than 74 percent are accepted to four-year colleges on a consistent basis. Compared to 39 percent of their non-AVID peers, 57 percent of AVID students take Algebra I in 8th grade, a course which has been established as a critical step toward college readiness.

Gira continued his presentation by describing the five key features of the AVID approach. AVID works by:

- Accelerating under-achieving students who have the potential to take more rigorous courses;
- Teaching academic and social skills not targeted in other classes;
- Providing intensive support with in-class tutors and a strong student/teacher relationship;
- Creating a positive peer group for students; and

- Developing a sense of hope and personal achievement through hard work and determination.

Gira added that the AVID model emphasizes an asset-focused approach. "We don't dwell on deficits. AVID empowers students to believe in their academic abilities. We focus on developing students' resiliency, integrity, and grit," he said.

Gira concluded his presentation with statistics related to AVID students' enrollment and success in postsecondary education. In 2012, AVID students enrolled in college at about the same rate as the national cohort. Gira reiterated that AVID serves a disproportionately low-income and minority student population, and that effective intervention through AVID has helped to bridge the gap for this disadvantaged population. However, with respect to first- and second-year persistence rates, AVID students do outperform the national average.

Next, **Dr. Michael Grego, Superintendent for Pinellas County School Board in Florida** gave his opening remarks. Grego spoke not only about his experiences with implementing AVID in Pinellas County, but he also drew upon his experiences as a district leader in Hillsborough and Osceola Counties.

After growing AVID in Hillsborough and Osceola Counties, Grego explained, he then moved to Pinellas County. Based on his experiences, Grego said that it was important to establish AVID programming in a deliberate and methodical manner. For example, in Pinellas, they began by implementing AVID in one school. As he explained, "It's best to unroll AVID slowly. The programs are self-sustaining and of high quality, so it's critical to think about the implementation of programs and their sustainability."

Like Gira, Grego stressed the value of building the professional capacities of teachers, both in terms of their own professional development and in creating a college-going culture throughout the district and community. He explained that Pinellas has made a significant investment in the professional development of teachers, sending AVID site teams for training over the past several summers. "The professional development is a way to create a common language among teachers within and across departments. After six years, we can now see the evidence of the importance of these strategies. In the beginning, AVID was seen as more of an elective, and certain teachers were considered 'AVID teachers'. Now it's permeated throughout the community, and that is priceless," said Grego.

Grego continued his presentation by noting that AVID fits in beautifully with Florida's statewide accountability system. He explained that since Pinellas first implemented AVID in 2005-06, graduation rates in Pinellas County have grown by 9.5 percent, and the number of students sitting for AP exams has about doubled. At present, AVID is being implemented in all of Pinellas County's traditional middle and high schools, serving nearly 3,500 students in the AVID

elective classroom. AVID Elementary is currently in place at five elementary schools in the district.

Grego concluded by stating that AVID students often require help navigating the college application process and that AVID provides students the support they need. He said that "students are starting to believe they can succeed. That is what AVID is about—making students believe they can achieve their dreams."

Dr. Peter Noonan, Superintendent of Fairfax City Public Schools in Virginia, was the next presenter. Noonan noted that he offers a slightly different perspective, because until recently he was a district leader in neighboring Fairfax County Public Schools, which also implemented AVID. Therefore, he has seen AVID work from multiple perspectives: as a principal, an assistant superintendent, and a superintendent.

Noonan highlighted the fact that AVID is aligned with the three goals adopted by Fairfax City School Board. These goals are: 1) academic success in college; 2) essential life skills; and 3) responsibility toward the community. He praised AVID's emphasis on life skills, such as goal setting and reflection, and, like Gira, pointed to recent research discussing the importance of grit and a growth mindset in reaching one's goals. "From a policy perspective, it's very important to make sure there is alignment from top to bottom," Noonan added.

In Fairfax City, AVID is currently a secondary school initiative. The program began in 2006 at Fairfax High School with 55 students. Since that time, AVID has grown to reach over 150 students, 43 percent of whom are Hispanic, and 130 of whom are enrolled in Honors and AP courses. According to Noonan, a core team of 45 teachers run the AVID program, which will include boot camps and other supports for students. Noonan ended his presentation with a discussion of student outcomes, noting that 100 percent of AVID seniors are attending two- or four-year colleges, and that every student sat for at least one AP exam.

The next presenter was **Cindy Zavala, a Junior at American University,** who participated in AVID when she was student in Fairfax County Public Schools. She began by stating that although statistics are important, she knows from firsthand experience that AVID works. "AVID sustains students, and a lot of programs don't do that. AVID taught me how to learn, organize my binder, take notes, make a budget, and fill out forms. I developed networking and leadership skills. AVID changed my life," she said.

Zavala continued her presentation by advocating for AVID on college campuses. Although there are other forms of support in college, they are not as successful as AVID, and many students drop out. AVID, she said, created a community of students and teachers who supported and encouraged each other, almost like a second family. Zavala credited AVID and the skills she gained through the program for the fact that she has persisted in college. She explained,

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"Something I learned in high school is making a difference in my life every day. I still see myself as an AVID student."

<u>Moderated Discussion</u>

Following the presentations, Jennifer Brown Lerner, Senior Director at AYPF, moderated a discussion among panel members. She invited **Derek Steele, the AVID Program District Director, College Success Program in Fairfax County Public Schools**, to address the first question: What does it take to successfully implement an AVID program?

Steele began by explaining that although AVID is an elective course; districts can make the initiative schoolwide through building a comprehensive site team. He stressed that the teacher training is essential for making teachers understand that the AVID strategies work and building a college-going culture, in spite of force fields that push and pull, like budgets. "You can put this in wrong if you choose the wrong teacher, the wrong students, or the wrong principal. AVID must be built with the fidelity necessary to create the right culture. Students in the program count on us to do what we said we would do," he explained.

Grego added that implementing AVID throughout a district can be quite effective in solving some of the problems citizens look to school districts to solve. AVID, he said, helps districts overcome challenges, especially those faced in more disenfranchised communities.

Noonan suggested that interpreting school board goals and developing systemic processes for youth who need time and support are key to implementing AVID successfully. He believes that AVID encourages students to meet the rigors of a real education. "We're not just getting students through a moment in time. Not all students learn at the same time and at the same rate. AVID gives us structure in the school day, though it's not 'plug and play'. AVID looks different everywhere you go, but the systems are the same," he said.

According to Gira, establishing a distinctive school culture is key to successful implementation. He argued that culture is "what we allow," and that it is the toughest piece to tackle because it addresses our core beliefs. Noonan added that the statistics around AVID are clear: this is a strategy that works. He noted that in other professions, if one doesn't change with the times, he or she is not acting professionally. AVID, he said, is a way to move the culture in a school toward a professional one.

Lerner then asked panelists to address the role of community partnerships in implementing AVID. Zavala said that her most significant memories of AVID were centered around teamwork. Noting that AVID worked not only within schools but across communities, she pointed to the role of mentors in helping her attain success.

Steele and Grego agreed that community partners were critical for providing much-needed resources and money to sustain AVID programs. Steele explained that training teachers and

taking students on college trips requires funding. Grego was grateful for an educational foundation in Pinellas County that helps leverage resources for the district.

Noonan continued the discussion about partnerships, suggesting that school districts leverage not only financial resources but also resources of time. He explained that his district began tracking Fairfax students at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) and George Mason University and found that students needed a lot academic remediation. He attributed these shortcomings to a lack of alignment between K-12 and postsecondary institutions. Noonan explained that AVID has made it possible for district and higher education leaders to have a conversation around this alignment. "We are now sharing practices K-16 rather than K-12, which takes a concerted effort. If we are organized for success, we are likely to be successful. If we are organized to fail, will we fail," he said.

Finally, Lerner asked panelists to discuss the role that policy plays at the local, state, and federal level. Gira stressed that school and district leaders should consider how policies affect an entire community, not just one school. He also advocated for policy to encourage less fragmentation within systems and more teacher professionalism.

Noonan opted to focus on state level policies, particularly those that add requirements for students. While well intentioned, some policies may pose a problem for AVID students. For example, the state of Virginia is now requiring secondary students to take a class in personal finance. This poses a challenge to AVID program and may inhibit students from taking an AVID course, which is already proven to be successful. He also attributed some of the success of Fairfax City's high school graduation rates—the highest in the country—to AVID.

According to Grego, "what gets measured gets done," and Pinellas County's goal is to raise the ceiling and provide access and opportunities for students. He noted that his district has been recognized by the College Board for increasing the number of students sitting for AP exams. Moreover, Pinellas has been asked to be a national demonstration site for AVID, about which he added that it is "critical in this profession to reach out and help each other."

Steele suggested that policy leaders understand what the statistics about AVID really mean. Although the numbers of participants may seem small, he noted that AVID site team members can change the culture of a school because the AVID-trained teachers are teaching non-AVID students, too. "This sense of culture is hard to capture in numbers. Our students and teachers trust each other, and one can only grasp this by visiting a school," Steele explained.

Question & Answer Period

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Forum attendees had an opportunity to ask the presenters a few questions. One participant asked whether the panelists could establish a link between AVID and high school graduation and college persistence rates, based on available data.

Noonan suggested that the data could at least show a correlation between the program and the indicators, although the link may not be causal. Gira added that causality is difficult to establish in a program that is working across a district. However, he pointed to data from Texas on improved attendance rates, which he said contributed in part to increased graduation rates.

The next question focused on how AVID is incorporating career readiness into its programs, in addition to its college focus.

Steele stressed that college is not the end place and that AVID team members continually ask students what they are trying to accomplish. By building confidence in students and establishing a vertical articulation from the 6th grade up, AVID helps to ensure that students are successful in college and careers. "Once a student can articulate his dream, we can help him," said Steele.

According to Grego, AVID does not treat college and career as separate entities. They are part of the same dream, he said. AVID's focus is on postsecondary readiness, which can be college or industry certification. He referred to the Pathways bill recently passed in Florida. Although students can move across pathways, the educational experiences look different, depending on a student's track. Noonan pointed to an ACT study that found that the skills required for college and career were the same.

Lerner then asked Zavala whether she felt challenged by her teachers to explore both college and career options. Zavala noted that her teachers always asked her "why" questions so that she could articulate good reasons for her answers. "Your dreams and goals and aspirations change, so it's always good to revisit your goals," she noted. The most important aspect of AVID, she added, was having access to opportunities and resources, which helped level the playing field.

The final question asked the panel to discuss the role of parents and caregivers in AVID, especially for students living in poverty or in rural populations. Steele said that he couldn't speak to rural populations specifically, but he said that in general, AVID appealed to parents because the program benefitted their children.

Zavala confirmed that AVID creates a positive energy that allows parents to trust the program. She added that she is helping other members of her family realize their dreams, by sharing some of the strategies she learned through AVID. Grego echoed Zavala's sentiments, saying that in the rural Florida districts he's worked in, parents participate if they feel included. "There is a degree of optimism. Parents love their children, and they want them to succeed. AVID is not dependent on parents, but it is enhanced their involvement," he said.

Gira added that AVID works in a lot of rural areas and that programs have to meet families where they are. Because AVID staff are trained to understand cultural nuances, they are able to reach these families. Zavala concluded the forum by noting that "people are afraid of what they don't know. This is true of students and parents alike."