

An Interview with Mary Catherine Swanson: About (AVID) Advancement Via Individual Determination

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Mary Catherine Swanson was born on September 3, 1944 in Kingsburg, California, United States. Before founding AVID in 1980, she was a high school English teacher for 20 years. She has won the following awards: The EXCEL award for Excellence in Teaching, 1985; Salute to Excellence Award, National Council of States on In-service Education, 1990; Presidents' Forum Salute, National Conference on School/College Collaboration, 1991; Pioneering Achievement in Education Award, Charles A. Dana Foundation, 1991; Headliner of Year (Education/Creative Teaching), San Diego Press Club, 1991; Woman of Vision Award, League of Women Voters, San Diego, 1992; Valley Forge Teachers Medal for Excellence, Freedoms Foundation, 1993; Golden Bell Award, California School Boards Foundation, 1995; A+ Award, U.S. Department of Education, 1996; She was named "America's Best Teacher," CNN and Time, 2001; McGraw Prize in Education, 2002; featured on 60 Minutes II, 2002; and has received an honorary Ph.D., from the University of San Diego, 2002. In this interview she discusses AVID and her current research interests and concerns.

1) What exactly is AVID and how did it get started?

I started AVID in 1980 at Clairemont High School in the San Diego Unified School District in response to federal court ordered integration. Clairemont High School prior to 1980 was a suburban school populated by middle class white students and teachers. More than 80 percent of the students enrolled in college. However, in 1980 the most affluent half of the student body moved to a new high school and 500 low-income ethnically diverse students were bussed to the school. These students had been in remedial curriculum in middle school and their families did not have college-going histories.

As English Department Chairwoman and an AP English teacher, I could believe that the incoming students were as intelligent as the students who were leaving our school, but clearly they had not had the same educational and cultural advantages which would make them successful in school. More than 100 of these new students were enrolled in college preparatory rigorous curriculum and given academic support in a regularly scheduled elective called AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination).

The first senior AVID class of 30 found 28 enrolling in four-year colleges and 2 in community colleges. Today all have graduated from four-year institutions, the last just 5 years ago.

Today AVID is a school wide program in more than 2,200 schools in 36 states and 15 countries which sets a college-going culture for almost all students. It begins in upper elementary grades and follows the students through high school. Teachers are trained school wide to offer only rigorous coursework and to make sure that their students are succeeding in that work through using writing as a tool for learning, Socratic methods, collaborative grouping, and academic reading strategies.

Different students need different support structures to get through school well. In AVID one teacher is responsible for a group of students throughout their tenure in a school setting. That teacher makes sure they succeed in each class and addresses the barriers which may be impediments for the students. Students who always earn "A" and "B" grades may not need much support, but students who earn "C," "D," and "F" grades need support. An AVID elective course scheduled during the school day gives "C" level students appropriate support. Others need more support, but it is the AVID school's responsibility to provide what is needed.

Over 25 years AVID has proved with more than 30,000 "middling" students, that when given academic rigor and support all students can achieve at high levels.

2) You have indicated that "marginal students" can meet almost any challenge if they are given the support they need. How do you define "marginal student" and what specific types of support do they need?

The marginal student is identified as one who gets "C" grades in courses which are not rigorous, but comes to school regularly and is not a discipline problem by in large. In other words, a student who does not want to fail, but does not know how to excel. Incidentally, research shows this is about 45% of students!

First of all, they must be placed into rigorous curriculum in order to be challenged (students can't learn what they are never given), and when this happens they understand that teachers think they are "smart" – a real key to their success.

However, most of these students will be lacking basic skills to achieve in the difficult classes. The support they receive here is from tutors trained in Socratic methods. The students take notes in all their academic classes, and for homework develop questions based on their notes. They then work in subject-specific study groups to clarify their questions with others in the same courses as moderated by a tutor. The key is that no one can "give" an answer, but all must "find" the answer. Then the students summarize in writing their understandings in their own words and explain the understanding to someone else in the group. If they cannot explain the concept, the content must be re-taught.

The students are also exposed to the wider world through attendance at stage plays, symphonies, museums, and at places of professional employment so that they can begin to picture themselves in different settings. Of course, since these students do not come from homes in which parents are college educated, they and their parents also need support in wishing their students to attend college, the entire college application, enrollment process, and financial planning.

3) "It's really very simple. Hard work makes people smart," The question is, how do we get students to work hard? How do we get them to write, edit, and polish their writing?

Students want to do well in school, at least until we convince them that they cannot. So working with students positively, saying that "I as the teacher will not quit working with you so long as you do not quit on me, and together we will see that you can improve" is very positive first step. Gradually as school becomes easier for them and their grades begin to improve, they become more and more eager to work hard. And just because we have so in calculated the importance of grades into our students' psyches, it's a good idea to give some kind of credit to the many rewrites or other work they may reproduce.

4) How does your program "help students develop good study habits and strong test-taking skills"? What are some other skills needed?

In AVID we teach explicitly how to take good notes, how to use those notes for study and clarification, how to develop questions on those notes, how to ask good questions in study groups or in classes, how not to restudy what one already knows, how to be able to explain concepts to someone else, how to write new concepts in one's own words, how to read effectively and review effectively. Test-taking skills are also taught explicitly. How to read a test question to make sure one is answering the intended question, how to review the answer one has written, when to guess and not to guess, what kinds of questions to spend time on and not to spend time on, trick words such as "always" or "never." The skills students need are the ability to know if they are really understanding the course work and to check that out by studying with others who ask good questions of one another. All of these are school survival skills, but rarely taught except in AVID.

5) Why should we encourage all students to take a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum? And who exactly should do this? Teachers, guidance counselors or parents?

Everyone should encourage students to take college preparatory curriculum. In fact, AVID is working with a group of 25 districts nationwide who are setting a college prep curriculum as the default curriculum which means that students and parents would have to choose out of the college prep curriculum rather than choose their way into it.

We should encourage most students to take this curriculum because it prepares them for the 21st century – both for the jobs that are available and for the skills of being effective members of a democracy. Some interesting data here are that according to the Rand Corporation, 90% of the net new jobs created in the U.S. during the decade of the 90's require a college education, and that a college graduate earns 91% more than a high school graduate. On the other end of the spectrum, we know that three-fourths of the repeat offenders in prison are illiterate.

6) What kinds of trainings do you offer and to whom?

AVID has professional development for almost every group of educators and in convenient locations. For example we run "Program Awareness Sessions" all over the country. We have intensive week-long Summer Institutes at five locations throughout the nation for teachers, counselors, and administrators. We have subject specific curriculum and pedagogy trainings which we bring to entire departments and schools within districts. We have AVID district administrator trainings for four weeks over two years in many locations. We offer how to use writing in all classrooms for learning. We offer tutor training. I could go on and on for we are a "training company." All of our trainings are listed on our website at avidonline.org

7) It is almost the year 2006. How can we prepare new generations of students for college admission and success?

The earlier we begin, the better. AVID is now an upper elementary (grades 4-5) as well as a secondary school program. Research shows that most students do well in grades 1-3, but the achievement divide begins in grade 4; therefore, it is important to begin AVID strategies then to keep students who begin to fall behind at grade level in their skills. In middle school the problem is exacerbated when students begin to attend classes taught by many different teachers and no one is

directly responsible for them. To further complicate the problem, we do not insist on rigor in middle schools, so the seeds are sown leading to students dropping out of high school. AVID provides a single teacher responsible for them in middle school and insists on academic rigor. The same is true in the high school years as they are enrolled in AP and IB courses. The key is to catch a student at the time he/she begins to fall behind and to keep school a positive place for the students to be. If colleges would also offer continuing transition programs for students – no matter how well prepared, we all remember what a shock that first semester of college was for us – students would be much more successful in college.

8) Nearly 95 percent of AVID students enroll in college. How many of them complete college, and is there follow up on g.p.a. and success?

According to studies done by Guthrie and Guthrie 2002, 89% of AVID students persist in college and 85% are on track to graduate in 4-5 years. Their mean gpa is 2.94.

9) What question have I neglected to ask about you or AVID?

One of the most amazing things is that AVID was developed by a classroom teacher, the only such program of its kind, but the lesson is important. Good school reform must be research based and it must be practical. The other key is sheer determination – not jumping from one reform to another, but having a clear vision and working and working on it, bringing everyone along, until one sees the results. AVID was aptly named – Advancement Via Individual Determination – that applies to students and educators alike.