

TAKING AVID HOME

It wasn't until Kande McKay moved two thousand miles from Madison, Indiana, for her third year of teaching that she realized how little her students were accomplishing back home and how much more they could do if she asked them to.

She had grown up in Madison. The town of fifteen thousand was a twenty-five-minute drive up the Ohio River from Louisville, Kentucky. Her mother owned a children's clothing store. Her stepfather ran a construction firm. At Madison High School, she was a good English student, with a budding interest in journalism. She was a cheerleader, popular with teachers and students. She loved the place, so she came back after graduation from Ball State University to teach at the school.

Then her life changed. She met a visitor from California, married him and moved to the San Francisco Peninsula where he had grown up. While he joined a construction firm in Mountain View, she got a job as an English teacher at Los Altos High School. There she encountered AVID, a way of teaching that made what she had been doing in semirural Indiana seem weak and wasteful.

RAISING THE BAR: HIGHER EXPECTATIONS ACROSS THE BOARD

At Los Altos High, "They expected kids to perform; there were no excuses," she recalled years later. "You could do rigor, essentially, and that was something I always wanted to have in my classrooms, but wasn't sure how." At Madison she had tried to make her English and yearbook classes rigorous, but students resisted. Like most teachers in America, she went with the flow. She developed warm relationships with her students. She tried to coax them along. That was her great strength as a teacher. But she did not ask them to extend themselves very far.

"I taught at Madison for two years, and I taught the same way my teachers had taught me, which was read the book, take the quiz, that kind

of thing,” she said. “Even at Ball State, even though they were very good at teacher preparation, I don’t think they taught us to work backwards, as AVID did. They didn’t talk about figuring out what I wanted my students to be able to do and work backward from there.

“The first two years I taught, it was, well, they either get it or they don’t. Either they get it and they pass, or they don’t and they fail. Teachers were there to dispense the information and record the results.” That summarized the way teachers felt about their work all over the country, particularly when they were dealing with average kids with average parents who had not graduated from college. The teachers, and in many cases the parents, doubted their children could handle difficult courses, like the math McKay herself had struggled with as a student. They were similarly pessimistic about demanding homework.

AVID had been invented by an English teacher, Mary Catherine Swanson of Clairemont High School in north San Diego. Swanson was similar to McKay in many ways. Both were conscientious and energetic, with leadership skills. But Swanson had more than ten years in the classroom and was a department chair when the idea for AVID occurred to her. She knew much more than beginning teacher McKay did about how to motivate students to do things they did not want to do and that other educators thought they were incapable of doing.

Swanson had started AVID in 1980 to handle a crisis at her school, a sudden influx of low-income students being bused in from south San Diego. Many teachers at her school thought such kids would need a watered-down curriculum, just enough to get them to graduation. It was assumed they lacked the parental support, motivation, and study habits to qualify for college. Swanson thought differently. She found thirty-two of the newcomer students, most of them Hispanic or black, who were willing to work harder to learn how to handle the honors and Advanced Placement classes they would need to be admitted to four-year universities.

The idea worked. By 1998, when McKay arrived at Los Altos High, AVID had spread throughout California and was popping up in other parts of the country. By 2015, it would be by far the largest college preparation program in the country. The positive reaction McKay had to AVID’s

higher expectations was by then common. The program would be important not only in schools with many low-income minorities but throughout the US education system, because it responded to educators' widespread frustration with inadequate time for and interest in learning at a deep and engaging level.

In the 1990s, as McKay was learning about AVID, US schools in general were stalled. Since the mid-1970s, seventeen-year-olds had shown no significant increases in math or reading achievement. The gains for thirteen- and nine-year-olds were not much better. Many states were attacking the problem with more tests. Students would be given annual exams in math and reading, and sometimes other subjects, to see if they had reached a level considered proficient for their age group. In 2002, President George W. Bush had signed the No Child Left Behind law. It required such tests in all states. Schools that did poorly were labeled "needs improvement" and forced to do more to get their scores up.

Teachers complained that the law did not measure everything they were trying to do. It ignored teachers handling subjects other than math and reading. It overlooked the ravages of poverty that left many urban and rural schools near the bottom of the proficiency rate lists.

There was also a discomforting fact that the debate over No Child Left Behind usually ignored: the proficiency standards established by the states were low. In many cases a student could miss half the questions on a state exam and still pass. Politicians and educators rarely acknowledged that the vast majority of students did not devote much time to their studies.

Time-use studies by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center showed that the average fifteen- to seventeen-year-old did less than an hour of homework a day, while spending more than two hours a day watching television or playing video games. The annual UCLA survey of college freshmen nationwide indicated that they averaged no more than an hour a day of homework when they were in high school, even though they were the top students, the ones headed to college. Those not going to college did far less.

Low expectations for teenagers were an embarrassing fact of American life, woven into the national culture. A frontal assault on habits so engrained was unlikely to succeed. AVID did not attack the problem

directly. Instead it undermined the resistance to hard work by offering students willing to seek a higher standard the kind of support they needed. This approach appealed to many ninth graders, and also to sixth and seventh graders when AVID moved into junior highs and middle schools. They and their parents were already worried about dealing with schools that were bigger and more frightening than elementary school. They would have meaningful contact with caring educators and perhaps more personal safety and protection from harassment than students who did not sign up for AVID.

In the largely suburban schools where AVID first blossomed, the students most likely to be recruited were those whose parents had not attended college and did not understand how to prepare for college. But those parents had moved to these neighborhoods in part because they thought their children would have a better education and have a better chance for college and better jobs than the parents had had. For them, AVID was a response to those hopes.

BEYOND ROTE MEMORIZATION: LEARNING TO ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Once students at Los Altos were in AVID, McKay was amazed to see, they were given something rare in even the best high schools—a style of teaching that was geared to conceptual understanding, not just memorization of facts and formulas.

AVID students were required to keep binders that were inspected each week for completeness and neatness. The binders carried all of the students' class materials and notes. In class, students were required to take Cornell notes, which led to the big questions their lessons were designed to answer, rather than just the names and dates they were supposed to remember.

The most important part of AVID, McKay thought, was the inquiry-based tutoring. Students attended their AVID elective class five days a week. On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, they learned how to take notes, question teachers, manage their time, plan for college, plan for life, make effective presentations, write persuasively, and develop other skills that the regular classes did not have time for. On Tuesday and

Thursdays, the tutors arrived. They were usually local college students trained in AVID methods. They helped students work on problems they were having in their other classes.

**WATCH CLIP 2: INTRODUCTION HANDSHAKE**

Introducing oneself to others is one of the many life skills that students learn in AVID classrooms. In this clip, AVID teacher Vanessa Aleman discusses how she uses the Introduction Handshake activity to help her seventh-grade students prepare for life outside the classroom.



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The AVID rule was that you had to be in advanced classes in your regular subjects, such as honors Geography in sophomore year or Advanced Placement English in senior year. The AVID students would be getting the best and most challenging teachers the school had. That meant they were more likely to run into concepts they had trouble understanding. In most schools, students struggling with difficult subjects sought help from their parents or friends or their teacher, none of whom had much experience in tutoring for understanding.

AVID tutors had such training. Watching what they did was eye opening to McKay. The average tutor in American schools would sit down with the child, ask her to open up her homework, and ask if she had any questions. If there were none, the tutor would check the work, look for mistakes, and explain how to get the right answer.

That was not what AVID tutors and students did. At the beginning of each tutoring period, the students would turn in forms on which they described a point, or points, of confusion they had reached in their studies. The teacher would check the forms and organize a tutoring group

of no more than seven students, for each of the subjects in which students sought help. In most AVID classes, there would often be two or three math groups—the most difficult subject for most students—and an English group, a history group, and so on.

Tutors were trained to avoid at all costs giving a student the answer. The students got the same training. They were shown how to help classmates figure out the answer by asking questions that pointed in the right direction. If the student did not understand why the United States got involved in Vietnam, the tutor would not say that Washington was worried that Communist influence would spread throughout Indochina. The tutor would instead have the student stand up and go to a blackboard or whiteboard in front of the tutoring group. The tutor would sit in the student's seat while the student wrote on the board his point of confusion and how far he had gotten in figuring it out.

The tutor was not supposed to ask questions. The students were. If they hesitated, the tutor would call on them to get the discussion going. For this example, good leading questions might be “What was changing in Indochina after World War II?” “Did you read the previous chapter on the international foreign policy of the Soviet Union and China?” “Did you review the chapter on the Korean War?” or “Why did the United States resist the Soviet effort to choke off West Berlin?”

Usually the confused student would make progress, sometimes finding the answer quickly. If not, he would be prepared to go back to his teacher with better questions. After he sat back down, another confused student would take his place.

McKay wanted to be part of that. She began to use AVID techniques in her sophomore and senior English classes. She attended the required week of training at an AVID Summer Institute in Asilomar, California. In her second year at Los Altos High, her skills improved. She told her friends back at Madison High in Indiana, particularly English department chair Carol Martin, about AVID. McKay's first child was born in July after her second year at Los Altos. Two months later, as she prepared for a new school year, thinking about taking over one of the AVID classes, her life changed again, this time much for the worse.

Her husband, at age thirty-two, had a stroke. There was no warning, no clue that it could happen to such a vigorous man. He lost control

of the left side of his body. His brain swelled so much he needed a craniotomy to relieve the pressure. McKay now had a disabled husband and a two-and-a-half-month-old baby. She did not work the fall semester. “It was just kind of crazy for a long time,” she said.

She and her husband had to give up the house they were renting in Los Altos and live with his parents in nearby Redwood City. It occurred to her that they might be better off, as he recovered, if they moved back to Madison. (They had been renting an eight-hundred-square-foot house for \$2,000 a month, when they could buy a sixteen-hundred-square-foot house in Madison with a mortgage of just \$600 a month.)

Somebody had to work, so McKay went back that spring semester at Los Altos High. But during spring break, they visited her family in Madison. McKay’s husband got better, but she felt they needed to be in Madison. Her husband’s parents were supportive, but they were older and found the situation a huge strain. Madison High took McKay back. The journalism teacher whose class she had loved had decided to retire, and she replaced him. Within a year, she was the AVID coordinator for a new program, working to persuade American teenagers of the importance of setting goals higher than they had ever considered possible.

