



Sean McComb and Claire Brown the Associate Director at Victoria University



Attitude adjustment – AVID learning gains pace

ET Staff

Achieving anything begins with self-belief, and while that might sound simple if you say it fast enough, getting there can be tricky. That goes double for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who often find breaking with negative mindsets and lowered expectations can be tough.

Doing it requires structure and effort; enter university preparedness program AVID which has been helping under-privileged and under-achieving kids into university for 30 years in the United States. AVID has been in Australia for the last three and has taken off nicely, funded by a HEPP grant and driven by Victoria University, with some 25 schools and 10,000 students now involved.

AVID takes a holistic approach, addressing a student's academic as well as psychological needs, equipping them with both the mindset and practical academic tools that will allow a path to university.

The program recognises that there's a lot of untapped talent among B, C and D grade students and targets these students, encouraging them to take on more rigorous course work. The extra work given in the AVID classes encourages deeper exploration of the content and has proven to be a huge component in getting these students into and through tertiary education.

There is now a generation of former AVID students in America who have been through university are currently teaching and using AVID themselves, which is an endorsement of its strength both as a program and a movement.

As far as proving grounds go, the Baltimore school system might be one of the tougher

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ones. The USA 2014 Teacher of the Year and AVID practitioner Sean McComb has been the driver of and witness to the program's efficacy in helping some very challenged kids at Patapsco High School and Center for the Arts, located in the working class suburb of Dundalk.

Visiting Australia to attend the AVID Annual Summer Institute Mr McComb says that AVID was a perfect fit for his school.

"We're currently over half lunch assisted or lunch free which is an indication of the poverty level in the school.

"The provision of a continuous mentor for the students through AVID has been powerful, there is opportunity for the students to ask questions and receive support from the same source. Inevitably there will be failures, but rather than each failure being a stamp on the student's entire school career we take it as an opportunity to investigate why and what went wrong and address the problems," he says.

The process hasn't been easy, McComb says that it has taken around three graduating classes for the AVID program to really fly.

"It took us some time to identify which students, those who were up for the extra work required, would most benefit from the program. But their transformation has been pronounced, the AVID students develop a whole new demeanour, it's noticeable that they carry

themselves in a different way," McComb says.

Claire Brown the Associate Director at Victoria University agrees when talking about the Australian experience.

"AVID themselves say that the program takes about three years to really get rolling. You do see some effects on the children very quickly, though it certainly isn't a quick fix," she says.

The fact is there is a wider issue than the students' perceptions of themselves, ideally the surrounding community should be involved in a rethink of their attitudes.

"It's a matter of escaping the idea that a certain postcode defines who you are and where you end up. You can see that a transformation has taken place in the successful students," she says.

Brown says that the program has built momentum in Australia largely through word of mouth.

"AVID in Australia started with a grant in 2011, there were early adopters but it seems that they were being watched very closely by the education community, word about the progress that was being made has spread rapidly and AVID has quickly gained traction," she says.

"We brought some kids into the AVID summer school because they're the best evidence of whether the program is working. They were impressive, carrying themselves with a real maturity and speaking confidently in front of hundreds of teachers. But when we went to another session I noticed two of the Year 9 boys were roughhousing in the hallway, I like that, that evidence of code switching, they knew how to behave in a serious environment but continued to be two 14-year-old boys," Ms Brown says.

AVID Summer Institute 2014

In December 2014, about 350 educators from more than 30 schools across Australia, New Zealand and the USA gathered in Melbourne for the fourth AVID Australia Summer Institute. The Summer Institute offers three days of intensive professional development where educators analyse AVID theory and practise implementing its explicit teaching skills into their daily lessons. They also work in teams to develop strategies to embed the AVID program school-wide and maintain its momentum throughout the year among students, parents and the broader community.

The first AVID Australia Summer Institute was held in 2011 in Wodonga for about 100 educators. At that time, there were only two AVID sites in Australia. Entering 2015, there are now more than 25 schools in the AVID Australia network. Several schools have made staff training at the Summer Institute a key annual professional learning activity.

The growing number of schools signing up for AVID and sending large numbers of their staff to the Summer Institute inspired AVID Center headquarters in the USA to offer Victoria University the opportunity to hold the first site licence for implementing AVID at a national level outside the USA.

The collaboration of AVID headquarters in conducting the Australian Summer Institute is important to maintain the rigour and integrity of AVID's mission. Each year, the best of America's AVID staff developers are invited to teach at the Australian Summer Institute. This is a highly sought after assignment for the US team.

With the exception of one member, this year's American contingent of staff developers was on their first assignment to Australia. They found passionate, committed teachers working to achieve the same improvements in learning opportunities for all students that they themselves have worked for in the USA throughout the program's 35-year history.

"I've now been home for a little over a week and have reflected on the journey of the Australian AVID experience. From the staff developer meetings, professional collaborations, cultural conversations, and genuine connections, my life has been forever enhanced. I am excited about the future and how AVID will expand throughout Australia to increase student achievement across grade levels and academic disciplines. AVID is the string that initially connected us; I look forward to strengthening those ties in the days/years ahead." (US staff developer, 2014)



The program operates under the WICOR framework – Writing, Inquiry, Collaboration, Organisation, and Reading to Learn. It's fundamental stuff and gives faculty a framework and a procedure that has been proven to work – WICOR can guide students to comprehend materials and concepts, and articulate ideas, at increasingly complex levels.

AVID tutors are often alumni of the AVID program, they're the front line and are essential in providing role models and creating an environment in the AVID tutorials which encourages students to ask questions and pursue deeper understanding of content.

AVID Excel works to ensure middle school ESL students can succeed in high school university preparatory coursework. AVID Excel accelerates students' academic language acquisition, while giving them strategies and supports.

The AVID Center has developed four Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Summer Bridge Programs to strengthen AVID's support for middle level students in maths and science and to encourage student acceleration and interest in STEM fields.

It offers rigorous maths and science content using WICOR strategies.

Both in the American and Australian experience with AVID it has become apparent that alongside the students' attitudes requiring a shift, faculty also has to adjust entrenched modes of thought for the program to be really successful.

"I've found that there's been some resistance among teachers in our top stream who are almost hesitant to admit students who haven't come up through the traditional ways," McComb says.

Indeed much of AVID's focus is on teachers and their attitudes, "Not meaning to sound simplistic, but much of the AVID process is about rediscovering what teachers already knew or were taught in the very early stages of teacher training. In a lot of cases teachers rediscover why they started in the profession in the first place and what they loved about it," Claire Brown says.

Victoria University runs the AVID Summer School every year in December for three days. The lessons learned over three years of operation in Australia are being incorporated into AVID toward evolving an Australian form of the program. **ET**