

Escaping 'Average'

Innovative Programs Make the Case That High-Level Classes Aren't Just for the Gifted

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School leaders in Seaford, Del., had noticed for some time that very few average students took the most challenging courses in the town's secondary schools. As was the case in most small school systems, many Seaford families did not expect much. Parents and teachers did not want to push kids beyond their limits.

But Secondary Education Director James VanSciver and other Seaford educators became convinced that with extra help, many more students could be taking algebra in middle school and college-level courses in high school. Four years ago, they began offering special tutoring, summer classes and Saturday classes. The number of Advanced Placement classes at Seaford High swelled from four to 14.

The focus on helping average students also boosted minority enrollment in the most rigorous classes. The district has about 3,400 students, 40 percent black and slightly more than half white. Through the initiative, administrators found more black students doing well and going on to college.

Julius Mullen, who directs a Saturday program for young African American males in Seaford, said the students discovered they could advance if given more time and the assurance that they had their friends with them. "When expectations are raised, I think students will grab for them if they have the support programs in place," Mullen said. "They have to see their friends achieving success."

Throughout the country, the desire to coax average students into high-level courses has inspired many innovations. Nearly all seek to teach students how to take notes, write papers and prepare for exams. They harness what is perhaps the greatest force in U.S. schools -- the urge to be a part of a group -- by giving the students a sense they are moving onto the college track with others who share their doubts and middling academic records.

The largest effort to prepare average students for high-level courses is led by a San Diego-based nonprofit organization called AVID, for Advancement Via Individual Determination. It was started in 1980 by Mary Catherine Swanson, a high school English teacher who was dissatisfied with how average students were treated at her suburban San Diego school, particularly those who were minorities. Swanson retired this year with the program operating in 2,716 schools in 39 states, including Virginia and Maryland, and in the District.

Fairfax County has AVID in 14 schools, more than any other school system in the region. It uses study skills classes to prepare students for one of the nation's strongest college-

level programs. "Average students who are put into higher-level classes without support is a recipe for disaster," said Derek E. Steele, who heads the county's AVID program. "Our program helps students recognize they are not average, but they have to develop certain skills to prove that to others."

AVID looks for students with C to B-plus grades and average to high test scores who are from low-income or minority families or who would be the first in their families to attend college. Carol L. Robinson, principal of Twain Middle School in Fairfax, said teachers refer students to the program, which starts in sixth grade and continues into high school.

Robinson said teachers look for "students with a lot of potential but who need an additional push." She cited several Twain students who were not initially recommended to take algebra but were enrolled in the course anyway, with the AVID teacher and tutors helping them adjust to the tougher math.

"Every one of those students did well," Robinson said. They all passed state tests.

Several school systems have designed their own programs to give average students a boost. In Bellevue, Wash., educators push middle school students to take a course load tough enough to prepare them for college-level work in high school.

Middle school students who struggle are sent to a supplementary support class, said Bellevue Superintendent Mike Riley. They go there temporarily during another period and remain in their regular classes, giving them two periods of the subject instead of one. "The support-class teacher maintains continuous contact with the regular teacher," Riley said. "When the regular teacher verifies a student is able to keep up without additional help, the student is exited from the support class and resumes the regular schedule."

Riley added: "Oftentimes, the trick is not getting the kids into the support class, but how to get them to leave it."

Arlington County's Wakefield High School, where 54 percent of the students are low-income and 70 percent are black or Hispanic, has won widespread recognition for its AP Network program. It includes an AVID-like AP Study Seminar, which teaches study skills and introduces students to more demanding courses through a one-week summer program. Wakefield also offers extra counseling and support for minority males. They meet regularly with counselor Al Reid to gain insight on how to deal with annoyingly demanding teachers, and a similar group for girls has begun.

Wakefield, one of three schools to win a special \$25,000 award in May for its AP success, ranks in the top 2 percent of U.S. public high schools in college-level course participation.

In the program Mullen directs in Seaford, 35 to 40 African American males attend class each Saturday for four hours.

"The first thought that comes to my mind each Saturday is wow!" said Dara Laws, an English teacher in the program. "There are so many other places these students could be. For them to be making this kind of commitment to their schooling is incredible."

Desiree Moore, coordinator of the program, was one of the first black students to take AP classes at Seaford High in 1981. "I know what it is like to take a class and be the only minority in it," she said.

Now her son participates in an AP preparation program at the middle school. "We push, push at home," she said, "but when he sees that he can connect with other African American students in these high-rigor classes, that makes all the difference."

Correction to This Article

A Nov. 28 article incorrectly said that the Fairfax County school system leads the region with 14 facilities that offer the Advancement via Individual Determination program. Anne Arundel County has 31 schools offering AVID.