Executive Summary

BC AVID Pilot Project:
[Early Implementation Report]

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Introduction

The British Columbia Advancement Via Individual Determination (BC AVID) Pilot Project is part of a series of Millennium Pilot Projects that attempt to find out what can increase access to post-secondary education (PSE). It was established by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, working in partnership with the BC Ministry of Education, to test a post-secondary-preparatory program only recently introduced to Canada[1] that could meet that aim.

The BC AVID Pilot Project is testing a BC-based version of the college-preparatory program labelled "AVID," initially pioneered in the U.S. in the early 1980s. AVID is designed to help middle-achieving students in high school who have academic potential, but who are under-represented in PSE, access their chosen post-secondary program. AVID already operates in more than 3,500 schools in the U.S., with a dual purpose that is frequently described as restructuring the teaching methods of entire schools and opening access to curricula that will ensure eligibility to four-year colleges for almost all students. The evaluation discussed in this report, which is being undertaken by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), is intended to determine the impact of the college-preparatory elective class— a component of AVID—on middle-achieving students in BC but not its potential school-wide impacts. For the sake of clarity, the intervention being tested in this project is labelled "BC AVID."

This report covers the early implementation of the BC AVID Pilot Project up to the point at which participants had completed Grade 9, which is the first full year of AVID programming following selection for the program. Data from the application process, surveys, observations and interviews have been analyzed to produce this report on the early implementation of BC AVID.

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1 In 2001, a two-school AVID program began in the Chilliwack School District, separate from the launch of the BC AVID Pilot Project, which occurred in 2004; by September 2005, the first BC AVID elective classes were underway.

What BC AVID Intends To Achieve

The BC AVID intervention aspires to increase access to PSE for high school students who experience achievement-related barriers that prevent them from accessing PSE. These barriers could include only average grade performance, the completion of unsuitable courses and lack of school engagement, focus or support to excel academically. BC AVID aims to familiarize students with advanced academic study and tutorials and stimulate them through other supportive activities, with the objective of enhancing their academic proficiency and readiness to access a post-secondary program.

The AVID program is substantively delivered through an AVID elective class in a school's regular academic timetable. Eleven AVID Essentials guide the program's implementation (see Text Box ES.1). Initially, high school students are identified who meet eligibility criteria that indicate they would likely benefit from additional support: e.g. getting B to C grades, having untapped potential, being motivated to go to post-secondary education and the absence of major behavioural problems. Among the students who apply, BC AVID enlists those who meet the criteria.

The selected students are then offered a place in a regular, year-long elective class meeting for the equivalent of an hour each day in which they are taught a number of study skills and learning strategies. These skills and strategies are put to the test when the AVID students are enrolled in the most rigorous courses available in their schools—the courses typically taken by higher-achieving students. The idea is that, with appropriate support, middle-achieving students can raise the quality of their work, improve their grades and qualify for admission to a post-secondary program. Other important features of AVID include the intensive and long-lived mentoring provided by the

Text Box ES.1: The AVID Essentials

The main features of the program are captured in the AVID Essentials that are intended to characterize every program labelled "AVID." For the BC AVID Pilot Project, the BC Ministry of Education contracted with school districts piloting BC AVID to implement the Essentials as follows:

1. Selection—AVID student selection must focus on middle-achieving students (2.0 to 3.5 GPA as one indicator) who have untapped academic potential and would benefit from AVID support to improve their achievement and begin post-secondary preparation.

2. Participation—AVID participants—both students and staff—must choose to participate.

3. Scheduling—The school must be committed to full implementation of the AVID program, with the AVID elective class available within the regular academic school day.

4. Rigour—AVID students must become enrolled in a rigorous course of study that will enable them to meet requirements for post-secondary enrolment.

5. Writing—A strong, relevant writing curriculum must provide the basis for instruction in the AVID elective class. [2]

6. Inquiry—Inquiry must be used as a basis for instruction in the AVID classroom.

7. Collaboration—Collaboration must be used as a basis for instruction in the AVID classroom.

8. Tutorials—A sufficient number of trained tutors must be available in the AVID class to facilitate student access to rigorous curriculum.

9. Data—AVID schools (or districts) must provide program implementation and student progress data. These will be monitored through the AVID Data System, with results analyzed to inform the AVID certification process.

10. Resources—The school (or district) must identify resources for program costs, agree to implement AVID Program Implementation Essentials and work toward participation in annual AVID certification. Commitment to ongoing participation in AVID staff development is also required.

11. School Site Team—An active, interdisciplinary site team must collaborate on issues of student access to, and success in, rigorous post-secondary-preparatory courses.

AVID elective teachers, regular tutoring from local post-secondary students and others such as teachers-in-training, and a series of information activities that are part of the AVID elective curriculum, including campus visits and career counselling.

The AVID Center (based in San Diego, California) provides a selection of professional development activities to teachers, counsellors and administrators to facilitate delivery of the Essentials. These include five days of training at the Summer Institute, which requires the attendance of each school's site team members—i.e. the team of educators based at the school committed to delivering the AVID program, including the teacher of the AVID elective class.

Initially, high school students are identified who meet eligibility criteria that indicate they would likely benefit from additional support: e.g. getting B to C grades, having untapped potential, being motivated to go to post-secondary education and the absence of major behavioural problems. AVID can also be seen as successful if it raises academic standards in the school (or district) as a whole. This could be because the improved performance of AVID students raises the average or because school-wide improvements affect non-AVID students. Although previous evaluations provide tentative evidence that AVID could benefit underachieving students in BC, no evaluation with a rigorous framework, including random assignment, has been undertaken before in the U.S. or Canada.

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2   Since the start of the Pilot Project, the AVID Center has changed this Essential to include both writing and reading—i.e. "a strong, relevant writing and reading curriculum must provide the basis for instruction." Most BC AVID sites have chosen to adopt this change.

How BC AVID Is Being Tested

The BC AVID Pilot Project will learn how effective AVID is in a Canadian context. The project attempts to test it as a practical working intervention that, if found successful, could be adopted by decision-makers in education to increase access to PSE. There is some evidence that AVID helps to prepare underachieving students to access college in the U.S. It remains to be seen, however, whether AVID will work to improve PSE access in Canada and, more specifically, in BC. There are differences in the educational systems and student population. Thus, the applicability of a college-preparatory program that was originally developed to solve problems identified in large, urban high schools in the U.S. could be questioned. To understand how well AVID works in BC, the research design of the BC AVID Pilot Project was established to include an impact study, some implementation research and a cost–benefit analysis.

Two long-term impacts of BC AVID are of particular interest: (1) enrolment in PSE, and (2) completion of the first year of a post-secondary program. The impact study will derive its estimates of impacts by comparing the experiences of the program group offered four years of BC AVID with a randomly assigned comparison group not offered AVID that instead takes the existing electives offered at the high school.

The use of random assignment to create a statistically equivalent counterfactual was strongly favoured because the AVID program was highly selective of those who should receive it. Membership of the AVID elective class is intended for middle-achieving students who have the desire to go to college and the willingness to work hard—that is, the students are capable of completing a rigorous curriculum but fall short of their potential. These characteristics of students for whom the program is intended are collectively labelled the "AVID student profile." In the U.S., the students selected for AVID typically have been first-generation scholars and from low-income or minority families. This selection method, however, could simply pick students among those with these characteristics who would go on to PSE anyway, even in the absence of AVID. This possibility places a requirement on any rigorous evaluation of the impact of AVID to control effectively for this selection.

The BC AVID Pilot Project collects data for implementation research in order to describe the program experience and to assess whether it received a fair test during the project.[3] It can assess how environmental factors might influence

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3   A fair test is achieved if the program is implemented as intended and the data genuinely and accurately capture its impact.

program effectiveness. Additionally, the implementation research can uncover best practices in program operations and help explain findings from the quantitative assessment of program impacts.

AVID's cost-effectiveness will be assessed using a cost–benefit analysis. This assigns a dollar value to all the costs and benefits to determine whether the benefits of BC AVID outweigh the costs for participants, governments and society as a whole.

Considerable care was taken in developing the research design and in implementing it to ensure that the complexities of school-based programs would be appropriately taken into account when conclusions were drawn from the evaluation. In practice, this has meant that SRDC has established frameworks to collect a great deal of information from multiple sources, including: administrative data from schools, post-secondary institutions and standardized test results; class, meeting and workshop observations; focus groups and interviews; online and telephone surveys of participants; and school-based application and data collection forms. These data are analyzed in the context of a logic model describing how AVID is expected to achieve its desired impacts on access to PSE.

ORGANIZATIONAL FEATURES OF THE PROJECT

Several steps were involved in setting up the BC AVID Pilot Project, including the identification and recruitment of schools, training of school staff, the identification and recruitment of students and the collection of data from a range of sources. The BC AVID Pilot Project attempted to standardize BC AVID's implementation to some degree across the participating schools to ensure that a similar intervention was being offered to similarly selected students. Careful training, oversight and monitoring of the implementation of the BC AVID intervention has been developed to ensure a better understanding of delivered AVID and to maximize the interpretability of findings.

The BC AVID Pilot Project is coordinated at many levels. The typical AVID implementation involves regular interaction between each school's site team, its school district and the AVID Center. The project has superimposed a research infrastructure on this framework, including an AVID Steering Committee to advise and guide the project partners. Its functions have included drafting a Project Operations Manual, implementing a support and feedback strategy and overseeing the evaluation. In addition, considerable resources have been available to support BC- and California-based professional development and training opportunities for site team members (for funding tutorials, AVID Center site fees, curriculum costs, etc.).

One of the first functions of the steering committee was to oversee the selection of participating schools. In total, 18 sites were selected from 28 responses to a request for proposals. These 18 sites were located within 15 school districts and represented 21 schools, due to some sites being combinations of secondary or senior secondary schools and the middle schools that were their feeder schools. Other schools—in addition to the 21—were involved in the BC AVID Pilot Project for recruitment only: in particular, a Grade 8 feeder school for a Grade 9-12 school.

Thirteen sites implemented random assignment to the BC AVID program for two cohorts of Grade 8 students, and one other site did this for a single cohort. An additional four case study sites contributed to the BC AVID Pilot Project's evaluation mainly through implementation research and without random assignment. A main goal of the inclusion of the case study sites is to determine how well these schools, which are smaller and located in more remote, rural parts of BC, manage the challenges of implementing the BC AVID intervention in such settings, since AVID was originally designed for large, urban schools in the U.S.

Recruitment and Selection of Participants

Recruitment and selection are fundamental to the operation of the AVID program, yet its selective nature poses a considerable challenge to evaluators. The BC AVID Pilot Project has attempted to overcome this challenge through standardization of the recruitment and selection process across the 18 sites and through random assignment of the identified AVID-eligible students to create equivalent groups of students.

The BC AVID Pilot Project developed and trained site teams in a standard process to identify AVID-eligible students at sites with the intention of ensuring that the same set of AVID requirements were followed at all sites—by definition, all were new to AVID—and to aid in interpretation of the project's impact estimates. A committee with membership from the AVID Center, the Chilliwack School District and SRDC designed procedures for BC modelled on existing selection processes for an AVID school district in Texas. The project provided training and support, a Project Operations Manual and standardized application documents to assist schools with implementing the procedures.

Recruitment and selection involved several stages and proved resource intensive. Site teams worked during winter and spring of 2005—and in 2006 at sites with two cohorts—to recruit and select AVID-eligible students. The process was successful in terms of recruiting sufficient numbers: 1,522 participants were recruited across the 18 sites.

During depth interviews, site team members commented on the intensity of the work involved, especially during the phase of face-to-face interviews that each AVID applicant has with selection committee members.

At nearly all sites, there were more eligible students than the planned number of AVID classes could accommodate. A selection from among those eligible to create a program group who would actually be offered BC AVID was necessary. At 14 sites, this selection was undertaken at random, creating in the process a comparison group of those not allocated to the AVID program but who would remain eligible for the existing programming at the school and whose experiences would be tracked alongside those of the program group as part of the evaluation.

In practice, Grade 8 AVID-eligible students who volunteered to participate in the BC AVID Pilot Project were assigned to program, comparison and waiting list groups that would determine whether and how they were offered a place in the class. The program group was offered a place in the upcoming Grade 9 AVID class. Members of the waiting list group would each be offered a place when vacancies arose. Comparison group members would not be offered a place in the AVID class at all. At case study sites, site team members assigned students to membership of the first two groups only. At random assignment sites, SRDC assigned eligible students to all three research groups using a computerized, lottery-like process.
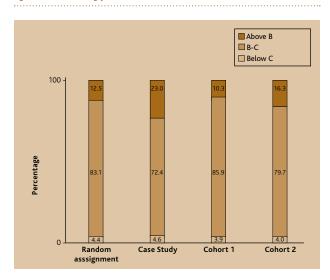
CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

The characteristics of the recruited students were broadly in line with the AVID student profile:

▌ The academic profile of recruited students reflected middle-achieving students motivated to attend PSE with relatively few behavioural or attendance problems.

▌ The students' socio-economic profile mirrored more closely that of BC students as a whole than the AVID student profile. Students from low-income families, minorities under-represented in PSE and economically disadvantaged groups, such as single-parent families, were not over-represented in the project sample.
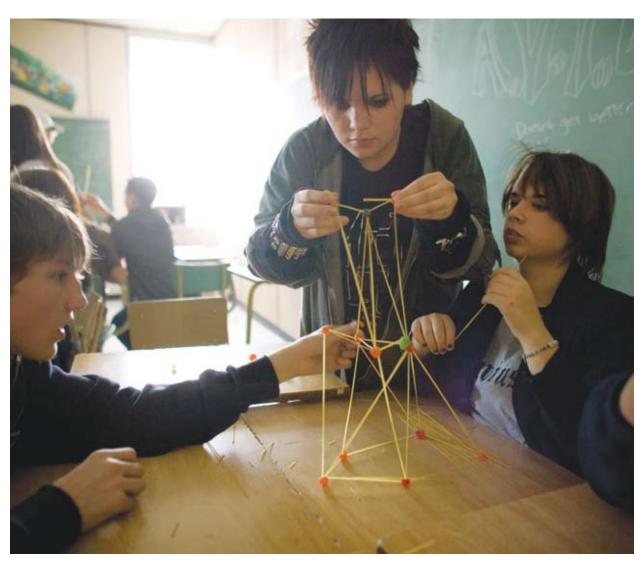
Recruited students matched the AVID student profile more closely at random assignment sites than they did at case study sites, which had a higher proportion of students with an average above B in Grade 8 (see Figure ES.1) and who had been reported to parents for behavioural problems at school. In addition, students at case study sites were more likely to have parents who had not participated in PSE than were those from random assignment sites. During depth interviews, site team members varied in their assessment of the AVID suitability of the students selected as AVID eligible.

Figure ES.1: Letter Grade Averages of Participants in Grade 8, by Cohort and Type of Site

Among sites that recruited two cohorts, there were few significant differences between the students recruited for both. Among characteristics related to the AVID student profile, only two differences emerged between the cohorts: for Cohort 2 students, there was higher academic achievement in Grade 8 (see Figure ES.1) and less use of additional support for learning.

There were few apparent differences in observed characteristics at baseline between program and comparison group students from random assignment sites. While the computer-generated assignment ensured that there were no systematic differences between the two experimental groups, very little sampling variation is apparent.

Early Implementation of BC AVID

SRDC collected both qualitative and quantitative data in order to assess the implementation of AVID to the end of Grade 9. The logic behind BC AVID is that eligible students will benefit from the program provided they receive sufficient exposure to AVID Essentials. This meant staff at BC schools needed to deliver the Essentials and participants in the program group (and those who entered the class from the waiting list) needed to attend the class in order to be exposed to AVID.

In order to understand the early experience of BC AVID staff at schools—i.e. the teachers, counsellors and administrators primarily responsible for ensuring that the AVID elective class was delivered to those in the program—and their students, SRDC analyzed qualitative data. The sources were 31 field and classroom observations and 57 interviews from the time of AVID site recruitment in early 2004 through to the completion of Grade 9 classes, which was in June 2006 for Cohort 1 and a year later for Cohort 2.

To measure program and waiting list students' exposure to the BC AVID program during Grade 9, quantitative information was collected systematically using data collection forms at the sites. These forms recorded, day-by-day, the occurrence of various AVID class activities, student attendance in AVID classes, student departures from AVID classes, student transitions on and off waiting lists and tutor attendance in tutorial sessions.

ACTIVITIES AT SITES

Site Preparations to Implement BC AVID

Preparations for implementation at each site began with the recruitment and training of site teams. Many AVID administrators paid particular attention to the recruitment of the AVID elective teacher, a role that is integral to successful program implementation. Initial training of site team members most often occurred at Summer Institutes in San Diego, beginning in August 2004. As implementation progressed, some schools found maintaining a sufficient number of trained staff for their site teams a challenge. Recruitment and training of site team members therefore continued over time due to staff turnover.

BC staff used a variety of AVID resources to prepare for implementation and worked to fit the elective class into the BC school timetable. AVID elective teachers used the AVID resource guides and curriculum to implement AVID curriculum classes, tutorial classes and motivational activities. A variety of AVID activities and resources were implemented in AVID curriculum classes, including writing, inquiry, collaboration and reading strategies. Scheduling the class into the timetable and working with the schedule once it was in place proved challenging for many sites.

BC AVID Classroom Activities

SRDC analysed the structure and duration of different class activities at sites. The AVID Center provides an elective class outline for Grades 9–12 in which students spend 40 percent of each week of AVID elective time in curriculum class activities, 40 percent in tutorial classes and 20 percent in AVID motivational activities, all delivered within the normal school academic timetable. During Grade 9 of both cohorts, however, schools did not deliver any tutorial class activities to program students in September and relatively few in October (see Figure ES.2). Over the school year, the
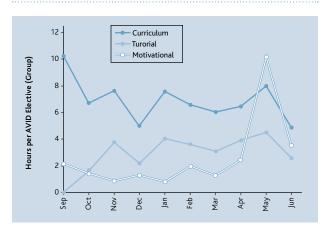
proportion of class time devoted to tutorial class activities, at 21 percent, fell short of the 40 percent modelled in the AVID implementation guide.

The AVID guidelines stress the importance of several other features of the AVID tutorial class component of the AVID program. Tutors must be trained to implement the method-ologies used in AVID tutorials. They should ideally be current post-secondary students. There should be one tutor for every seven students in tutorial class.

In practice, the implementation of AVID tutorial classes was challenging for many sites. Finding and maintaining suitable, trained tutors required ongoing staff effort. Tutors in the BC AVID Pilot Project were young and tended to be high school students. In a departure from the ideal AVID model, two-thirds were not pursuing PSE. Just less than half of the delivered Grade 9 tutorials featured the preferred ratio of one or more tutors for every seven students. Furthermore, through implementation, sites learned that both AVID students and tutors required time to learn how to use tutorials effectively. Thus, sites were challenged in their implementation of tutorials, one of the most distinctive features of the AVID program.

Figure ES.2: Hours of BC AVID Class Activities, by Month and Type of Activity (Both Cohorts)

According to their reports, BC AVID elective teachers used a variety of motivational activities with students, including team-building activities, special presentations and field trips. Students received information on various careers and post-secondary programs. The most popular month for scheduling AVID motivational activities was May, likely due to the longer field trips and campus visits possible during this month. To a lesser degree, February was also popular at case study sites for motivational activities.

The frequency of student absences in the AVID class grew with each passing month during the first year. The most common reason AVID students had for departing from the AVID class was their choice to pursue other electives at the school. This finding provides evidence that BC AVID competes for its students with other electives offered at high schools. Cohort 1 students departing the class were more likely to have been asked to leave the class than were Cohort 2 students. Conversely, departing Cohort 2 students were much more likely to have switched schools than were departing Cohort 1 students. These departures were not fully replaced by waiting list members, meaning that expected class membership declined over time; this was a more-or-less uniform trend across cohorts and types of sites.

Figure ES.3: Grade 9 AVID Elective Exposure among Program Group Members

In summary, there was evidence of considerable program-related activity at all sites. Many hours of AVID programming were delivered to the vast majority of program group members. In some areas—notably tutorials—some sites did not deliver Grade 9 AVID programming that matched the AVID Center's description for the elective class. In other areas such as recruitment and training, school-based teams learned a great deal from their initial implementation. A more complete story of implementation should be possible in later reports, including assessments from the AVID Center's certification process that determines the extent to which programming adheres to AVID Essentials.
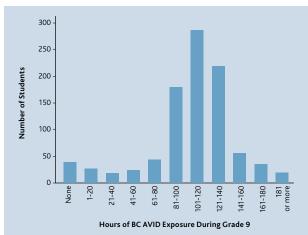
Other BC AVID Activities at Sites

Some BC AVID teachers reported that having an active and involved site team at their school was an important support for them during AVID implementation. Site team members assisted in several ways, including mentoring AVID students. The AVID Center encourages whole-school involvement, and at some sites components of AVID overlapped with other school programs. Consequently, there was some evidence of AVID strategies and Essentials likely spreading beyond the AVID classroom to other areas of activity at sites.

PROGRAM GROUP EXPOSURE TO AVID

As shown in Figure ES.3, 86 percent of program group students received 81 hours or more of exposure to AVID elective class activities during the first school year (Grade 9) following random assignment. Students allocated to AVID did not receive all available programming due to day-to-day absences from individual classes and to the departure of some of them from the AVID class.

FUTURE WORK ON THE BC AVID PILOT PROJECT

The evaluation of BC AVID seeks to understand many aspects of how the program could affect high school students as well as other stakeholders. The implementation observed and reported here covers the period to the end of Grade 9, leaving the analysis of three more years of program experience and estimation of its impact on enrolment and completion of the first year of PSE and its cost-effectiveness for later reports to be published in 2009 and 2012.