

Building College Readiness Across Rural Communities

Implementation and Outcome Findings for the
AVID Central Florida Collaborative Study

Executive Summary

Susan Sepanik
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OVERVIEW

In the United States today, more jobs than ever before require at least some postsecondary education. Yet too many young adults are either not enrolling or not succeeding in college. This scenario exists across many different types of communities, but schools in rural areas, particularly those with large populations of low-income students, face unique challenges in preparing and inspiring students to attend college. To address these challenges, the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) Center — a nonprofit organization working to close the achievement gap for minority and low-income students — partnered with three rural school districts and the local state college in central Florida to develop and implement programming focused on strengthening college preparedness among middle school and high school students. Supported by funds from an Investing in Innovation (i3) development grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the partners worked together to implement the AVID College Readiness System (ACRS) across eight schools, train secondary and postsecondary instructors in a shared set of teaching strategies and best practices, strengthen the academic rigor of their classes, and develop a set of “alignment activities” for school staff members focused on collaboration and consistency of teaching and study strategies across middle school, high school, and college.

The i3 grant also includes an evaluation, conducted by MDRC, of implementation and outcomes over the first three years of the project. The implementation study examines how closely the implementation of the ACRS hewed to the model design and examines the drivers of and obstacles to its success. The outcomes study uses a “pre-post” nonexperimental method (which does not capture causation) to compare both school staff outcomes and student outcomes before implementation with outcomes during the implementation years to explore the promise of the system to positively affect schools and students. The report presents several key findings:

- Overall, analyses show that the ACRS was implemented successfully at most schools with fairly high fidelity to the model. There was mixed success implementing the alignment activities.
- Positive change was seen in teachers’ reported use of most ACRS teaching strategies, and in teachers’ and other staff members’ reported attitudes toward academic rigor and college preparation for all students and reported collaboration within and across grade levels and schools.
- Little difference was found between the reported study habits and learning skills, engagement in school, and postsecondary expectations of students surveyed before implementation and of those surveyed after three years of exposure; however, on average, both groups had relatively high positive responses on most of the measures.
- Students were more likely to take advanced courses, such as honors and Advanced Placement, and earned more credits in these courses, which are intended to strengthen their preparation for the rigor of college work.
- Little difference in other measures of students’ academic performance (grade point average and English Language Arts standardized tests), educational attainment (overall credits earned and graduation), and high school persistence were found after three years of implementation compared with the outcomes before implementation.

PREFACE

Postsecondary credentials have become almost essential to successfully compete in the U.S. labor market, where technical and critical thinking skills are much prized. But many young adults, especially from low-income families, are not acquiring these credentials — in part because many high school graduates across the United States are inadequately prepared for college-level course work. In addition, too often, low expectations for students in middle school, high school, and college leave some students struggling to succeed. Rural communities face particular challenges in ensuring college readiness and success for students. Given the distance from urban centers, geographic size, and low population density in these communities, colleges there often have trouble attracting and retaining skilled teachers and have less opportunity for collaboration across institutions.

The AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) Center, a nonprofit organization working with school districts and schools in this country and abroad, is committed to closing the achievement gap for minority and low-income students and ensuring that all secondary school students are prepared for success in college and their careers. The long-standing and widely used AVID elective, a cornerstone of the AVID Center’s approach, supports middle-achieving students (those earning Bs and Cs) in taking and passing rigorous college preparatory courses during middle school and high school. The AVID Center has lately expanded its focus to promote its teaching strategies and to foster strong learning behaviors among students schoolwide. In 2013, with support from an Investing in Innovation development grant, the AVID Center partnered with three rural Florida school districts and a local state college to design and implement a system intended to align curricula and teaching and learning strategies across institutions, to build a communitywide commitment to college readiness and success for all students, and to create opportunities for staff at secondary and postsecondary institutions to collaborate.

After three years, most schools saw positive changes in staff’s reported use of the AVID teaching methodologies, expectations of students to do rigorous course work and prepare for college, and collaboration among staff and across schools. Students were more likely to earn credits in advanced courses, such as honors and Advanced Placement courses — presumably making them better prepared for college work — but little difference was observed in other measures of academic performance, educational attainment, and high school persistence.

This report describes the findings from MDRC’s study of the implementation of the AVID system, including obstacles the partners faced and their successes. While it cannot speak to causation — the study it describes was nonexperimental, and therefore captures only associations — it examines the promise of a partnership like this one to positively affect student attitudes, academic achievement, and persistence in school.

Gordon L. Berlin
President, MDRC

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This report could not have been accomplished without the efforts of a great many people. The study has benefited especially from the time, energy, and commitment put forth by the staff members at participating school districts and schools, the Heartland Educational Consortium, and South Florida State College, all of whom were vital in both supporting the data collection efforts and providing the information detailed in this report. District and school administrators, teachers, guidance counselors, college instructors, and students took time out of their busy schedules to participate in surveys, interviews, and focus groups throughout the years of the study. District and school staff members spent many hours pulling the administrative records data and answering our questions.

The assistance and cooperation of many AVID Center staff members, including Christie McMullen, Sarah Newman, Andrew Evans, Dennis Johnston, and Ellen Nickerson, has been invaluable to the research process and report writing. Christie and Sarah managed our data collection needs with great efficiency, took part in periodic interviews, and were unfailing in their availability to answer questions and provide support. Andrew created the online surveys and managed the administration of each. The AVID team also provided guidance in our creation of survey measures and feedback on earlier drafts of this report.

Meredith Kelsey and Barbara Goodson from Abt Associates ensured that the team understood and met the standards set for Investing in Innovation (i3) Development grants regarding outcomes and implementation research plans and reporting.

At MDRC, Mary Visher led the early phases of the project and offered support and advice throughout the evaluation. Kristin Porter and Marie-Andrée Somers offered assistance during the design phase. Nicole Clabaugh, Sara Staszak, Kateryna Lashko, Deborah Van Kummer, and David Roy provided programming and analysis support. Nicole and Cammie Brown assisted with qualitative data collection and project coordination activities. William Corrin, Alice Tufel, Leigh Parise, Barbara Condliffe, and Erin Valentine carefully reviewed earlier drafts of the report and offered helpful critiques throughout the writing process. Alice Tufel, with Jennie Kaufman, edited the report, and Ann Kottner prepared it for publication.

The Authors

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Attaining some postsecondary education or a postsecondary credential is associated with achieving better employment outcomes and earning a living wage in the United States today. According to a 2016 report from the Center on Education and the Workforce, a majority of the 11.6 million new jobs that have been added to the economy since the Great Recession of 2007–2009 have gone to workers with at least some college education.¹ However, less than half (46 percent) of 25- to 29-year-olds across the United States possessed an associate’s degree (or higher) in 2016.² One obstacle to degree attainment may be that many high school graduates arrive at college unprepared for college-level course work. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 37 percent of high school seniors scored at or above proficient in reading and only 25 percent of seniors scored at or above proficient in math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2015.³

Rural middle schools and high schools, in particular, face unique challenges in preparing students for college and inspiring them to attend. These schools often serve large geographic areas with lower population density and a more limited tax base than those in urban or suburban settings, forcing them to stretch their resources further.⁴ As a result, rural-area teachers are often asked to cover multiple classes or subjects, requiring more time to prepare and leaving less time to collaborate with their colleagues,⁵ which is important for strengthening teaching and learning skills.⁶ Given their distance from urban centers, many rural schools also face challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified teaching staff and in offering professional development and training.⁷

One response to the difficulties that rural-area schools face has come from the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) Central Florida Collaborative, a group of educators and stakeholders who are focusing on building college preparedness among students in select middle schools and high schools in rural central Florida. To achieve its objective, the Collaborative implemented the AVID

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1. Anthony P. Carnevale, Tamara Jayasundera, and Artem Gulish, *America’s Divided Recovery: College Haves and Have-Nots* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2016).
 2. Joel McFarland, Bill Hussar, Cristobal de Brey, Tom Snyder, Xiaolei Wang, Sidney Wilkinson-Flicker, Semhar Gebrekristos, Jijun Zhang, Amy Rathbun, Amy Barmer, Farrah Bullock Mann, and Serena Hinz, *The Condition of Education 2017*, NCES 2017-144 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).
 3. National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, *The Nation’s Report Card: 2015 Results, Mathematics & Reading, Grade 12* (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, 2015).
 4. Cynthia Reeves, *Implementing the No Child Left Behind Act: Implications for Rural Schools and Districts* (Naperville, IL: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2003).
 5. Linda Rosenberg, Megan Davis Christianson, Megan Hague Angus, and Emily Rosenthal, *A Focused Look at Rural Schools Receiving School Improvement Grants*, NCEE 2014-4013 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, April 2014).
 6. Hilda Borko, “Professional Development and Teacher Learning: Mapping the Terrain,” *Educational Researcher* 33, 8 (2004): 3-15.
 7. Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, and Rosenthal (2014).

College Readiness System (ACRS) in eight public schools in the area. The ACRS provides professional development to build teaching techniques and strategies that foster critical thinking and strong study skills, promotes rigorous course taking and college preparation for all students across a school, and provides additional supports for middle-achieving students who aspire to go to college but may not be attaining the credentials and skills needed for a seamless transition to postsecondary education.

Central to the ACRS is a set of AVID “core values,” which promote academic rigor and supports for meeting academically high standards in order to prepare for college and to reinforce a college-going culture across each school. At the same time, to align curricula, standards, and teaching strategies across grade levels and between secondary and postsecondary schools, and to help foster smooth transitions from middle school to high school to college, the Collaborative developed and piloted a set of “alignment activities” whereby teams of teachers, counselors, and administrators across the participating schools meet to make sure they are implementing the ACRS in the same way and to collaborate and learn best practices from one another.

This report presents the key findings from a three-year study, conducted by MDRC, of the implementation and outcomes of the ACRS and alignment activities in four middle schools and four high schools in rural central Florida. Because the study is nonexperimental, it can identify *associations* between the AVID intervention and any observed outcomes, but it cannot establish that the intervention is the *cause* of those outcomes.

KEY FINDINGS

- Overall, analyses show that the ACRS was implemented successfully at most schools, suggesting fairly high fidelity to the model. In contrast, there was mixed success implementing the alignment activities.
- There was a positive change in teachers’ reported use of most of the ACRS teaching methodologies, in teacher and other school staff members’ reported attitudes and actions related to the AVID core values, and in teacher and other school staff members’ reported levels of collaboration within and across schools during the first year of implementation. These changes tended to be maintained across the three study years.
- Little difference was found in the reported use of learning skills, engagement in school, and postsecondary expectations of the tenth-grade students who were surveyed before full implementation and those who were surveyed after three years of exposure to the ACRS. On average, both groups had relatively high positive responses on most of the measures related to these outcomes.
- Students across all eight schools during the third year of implementation were more likely than students before implementation to take and earn credits in advanced courses, including honors and Advanced Placement courses,⁸ which offer opportunities to attain college credit during high

8. Advanced Placement courses are college-level classes taught at the high school that prepare students for college placement tests that, if passed, can lead to earning college credit.

school. This is important because a key goal of the ACRS and alignment activities was to ensure that more students were participating in and succeeding in a more rigorous curriculum in order to be better prepared for college.

- Little difference was found between students in the third year of implementation and those in the three years before implementation in other measures of their academic performance (grade point average, or GPA, and standardized tests), educational attainment (overall credits earned and graduation), and high school persistence (whether they stayed in school through the end of the school year).

THE AVID CENTRAL FLORIDA COLLABORATIVE

The AVID Central Florida Collaborative is a partnership among the AVID Center, three school districts that border each other in rural central Florida, the local educational consortium, and South Florida State College. The AVID Center is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to support schools in closing the achievement gap for minority and low-income students. First established in 1980 in one San Diego high school, the AVID Center currently serves nearly 1.5 million students in over 6,100 schools that cover kindergarten through twelfth grade and 45 colleges and universities across the country and abroad.⁹

In 2012, the Collaborative won an Investing in Innovation (i3) development grant from the U.S. Department of Education to build its area’s secondary teaching capacity, strengthen the academic rigor of its classes, ensure alignment between grade levels and across secondary and postsecondary standards and expectations, and improve transitions between secondary and postsecondary education for students. The i3 grant also supported an evaluation of implementation and outcomes over the first three years of the project. The implementation study examines the fidelity of the actual implementation to the model design, and examines the factors that helped and hindered successful implementation. The outcomes study uses a pre-post nonexperimental method to compare both school staff outcomes and student outcomes before implementation with similar outcomes during each of the three years of implementation to explore the promise of the system to positively affect schools and students.

Four pairs of schools — with each pair consisting of one middle school (sixth through eighth grades) and one high school (ninth through twelfth grades) — are participating in the study, and in each case all the students from a single middle school move on to attend the high school with which it is paired. South Florida State College, the sole public college in the area, has a satellite campus in each of the three counties (DeSoto, Hardee, and Highland) of the participating school districts.

THE ACRS AND ALIGNMENT ACTIVITIES

The AVID Central Florida Collaborative focused on two core efforts that were new to the participating districts and schools: (1) implementing the ACRS in each of the four pairs of middle schools and

9. See “AVID Snapshot” and “About AVID” at www.avid.org.

high schools, and (2) designing and implementing alignment activities that led to “communities of practice” among administrative staff members and teachers from the districts, schools, and college to align their efforts to implement the ACRS and to share best practices.

The ACRS

The ACRS is focused on building students’ critical thinking, reading, and writing skills and strengthening their study habits and organizational skills. It pursues its goals through its three core components: professional development, an elective class, and school-based “site teams” that work to ensure schoolwide implementation of the AVID methods. Central to the ACRS are the aforementioned AVID core values and the AVID teaching methodologies, called the WICOR (writing, inquiry, collaboration, organization, and reading) model — a set of tools that teachers can use to create a rigorous college preparatory environment in their classrooms. The WICOR model is designed to build students’ reading strategies, study habits, and critical thinking skills in all subject areas, particularly in the core subject areas of English/language arts, math, science, and social studies. Box ES.1 presents more detail about the five WICOR domains.

The ACRS professional development component includes training at a three-day Summer Institute held off-site, local training during the school year, and coaching sessions for the AVID elective teachers and AVID coordinators — teachers or school administrators who ensure ACRS implementation across the school and lead the school’s site team. Teachers are trained in the WICOR model and all school staff members are trained in the AVID core values.

Along with supporting the whole school through teacher and staff professional development, the system also provides targeted support anchored by the AVID elective class, designed for middle-achieving students (those earning mostly Bs and Cs) who have the desire to go to college and the willingness to work hard, but whose grades are not generally high enough to get them into more advanced courses. During the elective class, students develop their organizational and study skills, tackle problems in their school work with the support of trained tutors, and explore college and career options.

Finally, each of the eight schools participating in the study has a site team made up of the school’s principal or assistant principal, AVID coordinator, teachers, and other school staff members who support the implementation of the AVID elective, address issues affecting student access to and success in rigorous courses, and work to ensure schoolwide implementation of AVID methodologies through teacher and staff training.

Alignment Activities

Education research confirms the need for teacher collaboration across grade levels to ease difficult transitions from preschool through postsecondary education and to align content and teaching methodologies.¹⁰ To enable collaboration and alignment across educational institutions in the

10. Joan McRobbie, “School & College Partnerships: The Missing Link. K-18 Reform,” *WestEd K-18 Reform Policy Brief* (March 2004). Website: <https://www.wested.org/resources/school-college-partnerships-the-missing-link/>.

BOX ES.1

The WICOR Model

AVID methodologies are used to build students' reading strategies, study habits, and critical thinking skills. The WICOR model strategies represent the AVID teaching methodology, which includes a set of tools teachers can use to create a rigorous college preparatory environment in their classrooms.

- **Writing** includes the AVID notetaking system, an adaptation of the Cornell system, which teaches students to take notes in a right-hand column and formulate questions based on the notes in the left-hand column,* and other activities to engage students in writing for learning.
- **Inquiry** trains students in the inquiry method, which uses levels of questioning — define, analyze, and apply — to encourage students to be responsible for their own learning process.†
- **Collaboration** sets up teachers as guides, facilitators, and coaches in a learning community and creates collaborative structures for successful group work.
- **Organization** is a set of tools for students to organize their study materials and their time to maximize learning — for example, the use of binders to organize class work and homework across classes, creating calendars and agendas to keep on task, and using graphic organizers and reading logs to structure class work.
- **Reading** emphasizes critical reading and uses scaffolding — where teachers first model a method or skill and then gradually shift responsibility over the learning process to the students — to help students develop their reading skills.

*Walter Pauk, *How to Study in College* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

†Arthur L. Costa, *Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking*, Third Edition (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001).

region, the AVID Central Florida Collaborative developed and piloted four core alignment activities especially for this project: four middle school–high school “feeder teams” (one for each middle school–high school pair), teacher content collaboratives, a vertical articulation collaborative, and a partnership with the local state college. The principals (or assistant principals) and the AVID coordinators from the two site teams in a middle school–high school pair make up a feeder team, which is tasked with ensuring the alignment of the ACRS programming and curricula across grade levels as well as facilitating students’ transition from middle school to high school. Each teacher content collaborative comprises teachers from a core content area — English/language arts, math, science, or social studies — who meet to align college preparation curricula and share best practices for using the WICOR model. The vertical articulation collaborative includes school principals, district leaders, and representatives from the state college and the AVID Center, who meet to strategize about full implementation of the ACRS and alignment activities, align curricular goals, and share best practices. Both the teacher content collaborative and the vertical articulation collaborative are communities of practice that allow time for professionals (teachers in the content collaboratives and

mostly administrators in the vertical articulation collaborative) to share experiences and learn from one another. Finally, for the state college partnership, state college instructors and administrators receive AVID professional development and participate in the teacher content collaboratives and the vertical articulation collaborative.

THE THEORY OF CHANGE

The theory of change posits that if implemented as designed, the ACRS and alignment activities would lead to more rapid and widespread adoption of the WICOR model and incorporation of AVID core values, along with increased collaboration by teachers and other school staff members, as illustrated in the logic model in Figure ES.1. Those outcomes, in turn, would lead to improved learning skills, heightened engagement in school, and increased motivation to attend college for students across the participating middle schools and high schools, resulting in improved academic achievement and, ultimately, leading to higher college enrollment and success.

THE EVALUATION DESIGN

The evaluation examines the first three years of implementation (the 2013–2014, 2014–2015, and 2015–2016 school years) and includes an implementation study and an outcomes study.

Implementation Study

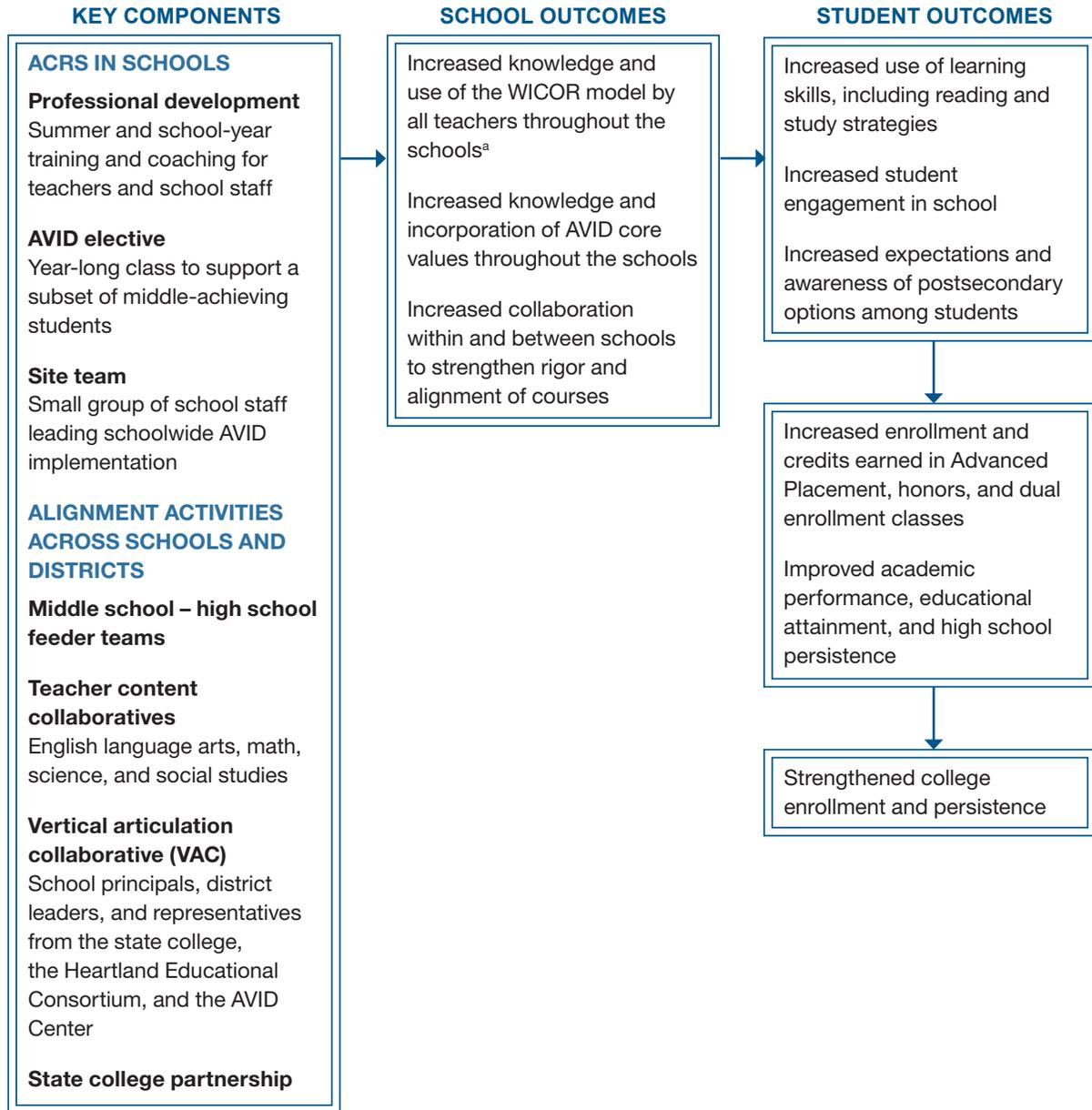
The goal of the implementation study is to learn whether the ACRS and alignment activities were implemented as designed (that is, with fidelity to the model) and what factors may have made implementation easier or more difficult. Two primary questions have guided the implementation study: (1) To what extent was the system implemented with fidelity to the model? and (2) What factors enabled or hindered the implementation of the system?

Two strands of implementation research were employed to answer these questions: measurement of implementation fidelity and qualitative research. For the former, the study team collected yearly measures of implementation of each of the key AVID components to understand the fidelity of the actual implementation in each year compared with the model. The qualitative research explored the challenges and successes in implementation through the collection and synthesis of data from interviews and focus groups of key school, district, college, and AVID Center staff members and middle school and high school students.

Outcomes Study

The outcomes study provides information about how schools and students changed (or did not change) during the first three implementation years. The first part of this study focuses on school outcomes (shown in the middle column of Figure ES.1), addressing questions about teacher practice, expectations for students, and the collaboration of teachers and other school staff members. Research questions related to school outcomes include the following:

FIGURE ES.1
Logic Model for the AVID College Readiness System (ACRS) and
Alignment Activities



NOTES: ^aThe WICOR model includes teaching strategies in writing, inquiry, collaboration, organization, and reading.

- Do teachers in participating schools report annual increases in the use of WICOR model strategies in their classrooms?
- Do teachers, guidance counselors, and principals at participating schools report annual increases in knowledge and incorporation of AVID core values throughout their school? Do they report increases in collaboration in order to strengthen the rigor and alignment of courses within and across participating schools and the college?

School outcomes were measured using a survey of teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators conducted during the spring before implementation began and each spring of the first three years of implementation. The survey was administered at all the participating middle schools and high schools.

The second part of the outcomes study focuses on student behaviors and educational outcomes (shown in the rightmost column of Figure ES.1). Research questions related to the student outcomes include the following:

- Does the system offer promise in terms of strengthening all students' reported use of reading and study strategies, engagement in school, and awareness of postsecondary options and expectations for postsecondary success?
- Does the system offer promise in terms of improving the following outcomes: (1) the likelihood that all students across the schools will enroll and succeed in more advanced courses (honors, Advanced Placement, and dual enrollment); (2) students' average academic performance (GPA and state assessments); (3) students' overall educational attainment (credits earned, promotion to the next grade, and high school graduation); and (4) students' persistence in school throughout the school year?

Student outcomes were measured using both a student survey and student-level administrative records collected from the school districts. The student outcomes findings in this report focus on the outcomes of all students in the school, not just students participating in the AVID elective course. The goal of the study is to understand the promise of the entire system to positively affect *all* the students across the schools. The study team conducted analyses comparing the years before and after implementation began using a pre-post analysis method to measure changes in outcomes over time at the participating schools. These analyses are nonexperimental — that is, the study is not a randomized controlled experiment, in which the outcomes for two equivalent groups (one that receives the intervention and one that does not) are compared to determine the effect. Thus, the study identifies whether outcomes changed over time, but not whether implementation *caused* any change in outcomes.

STUDY FINDINGS

Implementation of the ACRS and Alignment Activities

In general, the ACRS components were implemented successfully, with some components taking a little longer than others to fully implement.

- The professional development sessions were delivered as planned. Participation among teachers and staff generally met the goals of the model.
- The AVID elective was generally implemented with success throughout the three study years, although some schools struggled to fully implement the tutorial portion of the elective because it was difficult to find and maintain tutors in this rural area.
- Although every school had a site team in the first year, it was not until the third year that all schools were holding regular site team meetings with the appropriate staff members in attendance. High turnover of teachers and administrators at some schools may have hindered the successful implementation of this component.

Because the alignment activities were new features designed specifically for this project, it is not surprising that they were more difficult to implement and took longer to establish than the ACRS components, which the AVID Center had already been using nationwide. As described below, however, some student outcomes improved despite the difficulties implementing the alignment activities — perhaps driven by the more successful implementation of the ACRS, which was designed to improve student outcomes on its own.

- Middle school and high school feeder teams met sporadically in the first two years. The feeder teams were meeting more regularly by the third year, but most of them had still not developed an actionable plan by that time.
- The teacher content collaboratives also struggled to get off the ground, suffering from a lack of definition and focus, as well as attendance challenges; it was difficult to find substitute teachers to take over content teachers' classrooms during the full-day meetings.
- District and school administrators met and created a productive community of practice through the vertical articulation collaborative.
- The college partnership was not successful in that the expected number of college faculty and administrators did not always attend the teacher content collaborative and vertical articulation collaborative meetings. However, college faculty participated in more professional development sessions than were originally planned.

The ACRS and alignment activities benefited from the strong support of the AVID systems coach — an AVID Center employee who guided all the program activities within and across schools — as well as the active engagement of school administrators and the robust community of practice created by the collaboration of district and school administrators and some teachers.

Adoption of the WICOR Model, AVID Core Values, and Collaborative Approach

The growth of the ACRS across the schools may have contributed to the changes found in teachers' reported use of most of the WICOR model strategies — many of which reflect good teaching practices that could have been learned in other training sessions before the AVID study began. Teachers reported using these types of strategies more during the first year of implementation than they had before implementation, and that level of reported use in Year 1 held steady for the subsequent two years. Teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators at the schools also reported a higher level of conviction about the importance and feasibility of instilling academic rigor and creating a college-going culture across the school — which make up the AVID core values — during the implementation years than before implementation.

Student Behaviors, Attitudes, and Academics

The reported use of learning skills, engagement in school, awareness of postsecondary opportunities, and planned postsecondary degree attainment among tenth-graders before implementation compared with another group of tenth-graders after three years of implementation showed little difference between the two groups, but both groups had relatively positive responses on most of these measures. Students increased the number of credits earned in advanced courses, with 8 percent more students passing at least one advanced course in the third year of implementation than passed in the years before implementation. Other student outcomes, including course grades, state assessment scores, educational attainment, and school persistence, did not change substantially on average.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings that teachers increased their use of best-practice instructional methodologies and that staff members across the schools strengthened their conviction that all students can succeed in college both point to an important culture shift at the schools, moving toward a stronger belief that more students should take and can succeed in rigorous course work. This change in attitude may have helped lead to the positive finding that students were taking and succeeding in more advanced courses during the first three implementation years than was observed in the schools before implementation began.

Research suggests that content area teachers across grades and across secondary and postsecondary institutions coming together in communities of practice — to ensure that they share expectations of students and to help pave the way for smooth transitions between grade levels — is key to students' postsecondary education success.¹¹ Establishing this type of community across schools and colleges is not easy, and the difficulties can be exacerbated by the sheer physical distance between schools in rural areas. While the Collaborative partners struggled with implementing the teacher content collaboratives, lessons were learned from the process about the need to include school and district leaders in meaningful ways and about the importance of setting meetings at times when teachers can realistically attend.

11. McRobbie (2004).

One positive finding that might portend future success in this area was the embrace of AVID teaching methodologies by the local state college. The use of shared language and a set of methodologies among secondary and postsecondary educators could allow for more effective future dialogues. Moreover, according to the theory of change, the consistency — or alignment — of methods in the secondary and postsecondary education experiences of students could eventually lead to longer-term college success by easing the transition into postsecondary education for these students.

ABOUT MDRC

MDRC IS A NONPROFIT, NONPARTISAN SOCIAL AND EDUCATION POLICY RESEARCH ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York; Oakland, California; Washington, DC; and Los Angeles, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff members bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-prisoners, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.