The Benefits of Advisory

Last basketball season, I overheard two former students commiserating about their favorite team’s less than stellar season—a normal teenage interaction. But I saw this as a hard-won moment of mutual understanding. You see, when these two boys (“John” and “B.J.”) were in middle school, John was a social leader, while B.J. struggled to establish his social identity. B.J. tried to impress and befriend John, and John teased B.J., who sometimes misunderstood this attention as friendship, and the cycle continued. My colleagues looked at me askance when I specifically requested to have them both in my advisory that year. I believed that being in advisory together could improve their relationship—and it did.

Create a “Home Base”
An advisory program empowers teachers, as advisors, to act as adult advocates for a group of students, or advisees. Ideally, an advisory meets daily for 10 to 30 minutes, although structures vary from school to school. Relationships are the core of advisory. An effective advisory gives students a “home base” where they have a specific adult advocate, along with a supportive community of peers in their fellow advisees.

Advisory can be particularly helpful for middle school students. Young adolescents are at a stage of change, experimenting with identities and exploring questions regarding who they are and who they hope to become. Middle schools need to be developmentally responsive to these needs, and to be challenging, empowering, and equitable, according to the Association for Middle Level Education. Further, the Developmental Designs for Middle School program, which promotes advisory, states as one of its guiding principles that knowledge of students’ intellectual, social, emotional, and physical needs is as important as knowledge of content. A thoughtful advisory program can support all of these goals by attending to young adolescents’ social and emotional development in addition to their cognitive development.

Advisory can aid students in the development of their identity by giving them a space to work toward goals, discuss important topics, and strengthen interpersonal skills. Within advisory, students can give and receive support for aspects of school life including, but not limited to, academics. Over time, students may feel comfortable sharing personal concerns, and may benefit from the group’s receptive listening and advice. A program can achieve this sense of community and support through purposeful design, thoughtful planning, continuing conversation among advisors, and a commitment to students’ overall development and success.

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Set Advisory Leadership
Principals and other administrators who are interested in implementing an advisory program should form a committee of teachers who can develop goals for the program and, if possible, visit nearby schools to explore how they implement advisory. Appointing a designated teacher to take the lead for a particular team or grade level can promote teacher leadership and give all teachers a point person for questions and concerns.

Schools may start advisory with an incoming sixth-grade class, and then grow the program grade by grade as that group of students advances through middle school.

Activities in advisory vary from school to school. In many schools, advisors of the same grade level follow a common plan of activities or topics. At other schools, individual advisors have considerable leeway with what they choose to do in advisory. At one school where I taught, each grade level had a designated teacher who was the point person for advisory, though all teachers contributed to planning and reflection. With their students, advisors can have guided discussions, hold goal-setting conferences or student-led conferences, and play team-building games.

Provide Ongoing Support
Once a school has started an advisory program, principals can support it in an ongoing manner by taking the following actions:

1. Participate. Enter different classrooms during advisory and participate in the activity. Your presence is a visible sign of support for teachers and students, and it gives you hands-on experience with advisory.

2. Model. When possible, structure a staff meeting or part of a meeting the way that an advisory meeting would be run. Pose a question, play a quick game, or include some other mechanism that parallels advisory. If it is not feasible to structure an all-staff meeting like advisory, encourage smaller groups (such as teams, grade-level groups, or committees) to include elements from advisory in their meetings.

3. Protect. Since advisory is non-academic time, it can be tempting to schedule fire drills, assemblies, or other changes to the daily schedule during this time. Protect advisory’s place in the schedule, if possible.

4. Encourage. Advisory can be a place for serious topics, but it also can have a light-hearted side. At many schools, different advisors may...
give themselves names or mascots, and some schools host events, such as intramural games or other contests where students compete by advisory. At one school, we organized an egg-drop contest, and students competed by advisory. These games and events help each advisory reinforce its own group identity.

5. **Think big.** There may be a program or theme you would like to emphasize at your school that might not “fit” in the normal school schedule. Service learning projects, for instance, can be anchored in advisory. One year, students at the school where I taught went to community agencies for service learning or did campus clean-up projects with their advisory groups.

6. **Organize.** Many schools prepare students for student-led conferences during advisory. As students amass work samples from their classes, they can build their portfolios in advisory. On the day of conferences, advisors can moderate the conferences between students and parents.

7. **Reflect.** Give teachers a forum to discuss what works and what does not with their advisees. When possible, limit the discussion to specific topics (such as goal-setting meetings or peer-mediation skills) for more constructive conversation.

It is important to tailor advisory to the character and needs of each school, rather than to adopt an outside program whole-cloth. Teachers can benefit from advisory when they truly become advocates for their group of students and can support these young adolescents in their school work and in other domains. Students benefit when they have a dedicated adult advocate in their advisor and a receptive group of peers in their fellow advisees. For my students John and B.J, advisory offered the tools and the space to find common ground and understanding.

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