

Advisory: A Middle School Essential

The advisory period is the linchpin in the middle-school movement, some experts say. Many middle-school programs suffer from poorly implemented advisories, however. This week, *Education World* answers the question What makes a successful advisory? We also include activity ideas for improving advisories!

"I think an advisory of some type is essential to a middle-school program," teacher Pamela Chandler told *Education World*. "These kids have needs beyond academics that must be addressed. Advisory allows for a consistent, cohesive program that puts all school community members on the same page."

"I love the advisory program and wouldn't want to lose it," said Kathy Thompson, a teacher and librarian at S. Bruce Smith School in Edmonton, Alberta. "We base all our school functions on this grouping. There is a great sense that this is 'our group.' School competitions help build a sense of unity."

"I feel advisory is a very valuable time of day, for some students the most valuable time there is," said Dr. Jeannette Stern, a teacher at Wantagh (New York) Middle School. "Many students no longer have adults with whom to interact and to ask important questions."

SO, WHAT IS AN 'ADVISORY'?

"I have come to believe that the teacher advisory is the very best idea in the middle-level [movement]," said Chris Stevenson, professor of education at the University of Vermont and author of *Teaching Ten to Fourteen Year Olds*. Stevenson adds that the advisory is the element of the concept most inadequately implemented.

"Too often advisory groups are too large (more than 20 students) and the time is too brief (less than 20 minutes)," said Stevenson in his book. "It isn't unusual to find that little or no in-service preparation was invested in preparing teachers and the program, resulting in highly diverse commitments. Yet the teacher advisory remains the soul of the middle-level movement; in that context, more than any other, teachers can act on their commitment to education based on the nature and needs of adolescent children."

ADVISORY: A DEFINITION

"An advisory is an organized group of one adult and a dozen or so kids that serves as the students' first line of affiliation in their school," said Stevenson in *Teaching Ten to Fourteen Year Olds*. "The group meets at least once daily, usually for the first 20 minutes or so of the day."

Among the purposes of the advisory, Stevenson writes, are to

- ensure that each student is known well at school by at least one adult who is that youngster's advocate (advisor);
- guarantee that every student belongs to a peer group;
- help every student find ways of being successful within the academic and social options the school provides;
- promote communication and coordination between home and school.

Some might equate the middle-school advisory with the "It takes a village to raise a child" philosophy that gained media popularity a few years ago. Indeed, most large-scale interventions have failed at raising good children, said author Howard Johnston, a professor of secondary education at the University of South Florida. Writing in *Schools in the Middle* magazine (March 1997), Johnston said, "Good children are raised by communities of adults who share common beliefs and values about what constitutes reasonable and appropriate behavior, who accept responsibility for sharing the wisdom of their years and experience with children, and who share a common commitment to all the children in the community and nation. That is how we were raised. That is how good, successful, achieving, happy children are raised today."

That said, a personal connection to an advisor can make a huge difference in whether a middle-school student succeeds or fails. Helping students succeed is what advisories are all about.

HOW MANY? HOW LONG?

Although the "ideal" advisory might meet for 20 minutes each day, the length and frequency of advisories vary from school to school.

Most advisories meet on a daily basis. Some meet four times a week. Others might meet for longer periods of time once a week or once every two weeks.

Some schools hold advisories first thing in the morning. Other schools might schedule a 20-minute advisory time between the second and third periods of the day. In one school, where the lunch hour comprises three 20-minute lunch periods (one lunch period for each grade 6 through 8), advisories meet for the 40 minutes of the hour when students aren't eating.

Advisory groups come in all sizes. The prescribed "ideal" size is usually 12 to 18 students. Many advisory programs, however, are successful with larger groups.

In some schools, advisory groups include students who are all in the same grade. In other schools, each group includes students of mixed grades, and students stay with the same advisor during their years in the school.

Some advisories are structured, using prescribed commercial programs or programs designed by counselors and teachers in the schools. Others are less structured, allowing advisors and students to create their own meaningful activities.

A SAMPLING OF ADVISORY ACTIVITIES

Pamela Chandler's students recently completed an activity in which they took a survey about the stressors in their lives. "Students were amazed at how many stressful things they deal with on a daily basis," said Chandler. After the survey, students brainstormed ways of dealing with those stressors.

In Kathy Thompson's advisory group, a recent discussion about self-esteem led two students to share their experiences with bulimia. "It was great that they felt safe within the group," said Thompson, "and the others responded in a supportive manner."

The students also use their advisory time for community-service projects. For example, during the December holiday time, Thompson's students put together hampers for needy families in their community. "Some students donate so much it is astounding," said Thompson. "We end up with about six very large boxes of donations per group. Some students come with me to make the deliveries. It is a real eye-opener for the students."

In Jeannette Stern's advisory, students got together and threw a baby shower for an advisee whose mother was having a baby by the student's new stepfather. "This made her feel important and part of what she had perceived to be another family," said Stern. "We have visited hospitals, made get-well cards, gone to wakes, and paid shivah calls -- all things that students do not feel comfortable doing alone but unfortunately need to do," Stern added.

Last fall, before parent conferences, Stern asked her advisees to fill out a form designed to gather information about how students felt about school and how they thought their parents would respond to the upcoming advisory conference. "Included on that form was the question---What would you like me to discuss with your parents that you feel is difficult for you to address?" said Stern. "Students have brought up the need for privacy, how they are trying hard even if they are not meeting with the results they would like, and that even though they like and respect their parents, they need to try things out for themselves. These can be difficult issues, and parents and the advisor can then discuss how to deal with them so that everybody is happier."

"Our parents are pleased with advisory since they feel there is one person in the building --who sees the child every day and can discuss general concerns and ideas," added Stern.

MORE ACTIVITIES

On a recent posting to a listserv, one teacher told about a group that gathered last summer to "create an advisory curriculum in response to teachers complaining that advisory was a waste of time." The result is a curriculum that addresses many staff concerns. Among the activities developed by the group are some designed to help students build study, organizational, and time-management skills; some that help them get involved in their community; and some that focus on test-preparation and test-taking skills.

Last spring, students at T. S. Nurnberger Middle School in St. Louis, Michigan, celebrated Math Awareness Week during their advisory period. Each day during the week, students had the opportunity to participate in a math activity of the day. Students who correctly completed the activities had the chance to earn prizes from local merchants and professional sports teams. Among the Math Awareness Week Activities were these:

- Wear a number shirt day. Students wore shirts with numbers on them. During their advisory period, they added up the numbers on everybody's shirts, then figured out the average.
- Graphing day. Students developed a composite graph by counting the number of students in their advisory who were wearing glasses and watches. They also wrote a brief paragraph explaining how they collected data and plotted it on the graph.
- Design your dream house day. Students designed the houses of their dreams. The budding architects had to use circles, squares, rectangles, triangles, rhombuses, and parallelograms in their designs.

Other activities that might be included in a successful advisory program are sustained silent reading, clubs, mini-courses or exploratories, intramural sports, cooperative group challenges, and "game days." Teachers might also construct activities around such important themes as diversity, career awareness, values, learning styles, communications skills, peer pressure, drug and alcohol awareness, self-esteem, problem-solving, decision-making, and thinking about the future.

It is extremely important that the Advisory program has a few clear goals which ground it, otherwise, it can deteriorate into almost anything or sadly, nothing at all.

Advisors must regularly review and revise the activities they use, experts say. The advisory program probably isn't working if it isn't in a constant state of flux. Teachers need to tinker constantly to make sure activities meet students' needs. Worthwhile advisory activities should focus on developing a trusting relationship between each student and an adult advisor, enhancing each student's sense of belonging, providing academic and social guidance and support, developing each student's self-confidence and self-esteem, providing leadership opportunities, and developing cooperative work skills.

A SHARED COMMITMENT

"In the past 23 years, I have been involved in too many different [advisory] programs," said one recent poster to a middle-school listserv. "To date, many have failed. The primary reason for failure is the fact that they were mandated top-down."

A top-down mandate, with little or no input from, or training for, teachers -- even with the best-designed curriculum -- is almost certainly doomed to fail. On the other hand, a successful advisory program -- one that teachers buy into -- can yield measurable results, including improved grades and test scores, fewer behavior-related referrals, and better attendance.