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Advisories Inspire, Motivate Students

Helping students focus on what makes them happy and building connections to themselves, people, and institutions is part of the successful formula for a two-year advisory program at one Missouri middle school. Included: Activities to use in middle-school advisory groups.



Finding fun, meaningful personal-growth activities for middle-school-age students can be challenging. The program cant be too serious or it will feel like yet another obligation; it cant be too touchy-feely or it will generate eye-rolling and text messages of lame."

While it wasnt easy, administrators at [Villa Duchesne Middle School](#) in St. Louis, Missouri, came up with a two-year advisory program for their students that not only is popular, but also helps students become more self-aware, happy, thoughtful people.

Two administrators from the school gave a presentation at the [Association of School Curriculum Development \(ASCD\)](#) conference in March called "Can You Teach Happiness?" on how they developed and now run the advisory program for their seventh and eighth graders.

MAKING POSITIVE CONNECTIONS

Even though Villa Duchesne is a small Roman Catholic school for girls -- there are about 133 students combined in seventh and eighth grades -- administrators still thought that their students would benefit from participating in advisory groups, said Francesca DiRollo, Villa Duchesnes middle-school director of students. Advisories are small groups of students mentored by a teacher.

Among the goals of the five-year-old advisory program are for students to make connections with a subsection of their class and to connect with an adult, said Mary Crowder, the upper school director of counseling. We wanted to infuse the counseling program through it, with a focus on positive psychology," Crowder added.

Students are assigned mostly at random to advisory groups in seventh grade and remain in the same groups with the same teachers for two years. Administrators do spread students from the same elementary school throughout the groups so they can meet other children.

You have to frame it so it is fun and also infuse it with things you think are important."

Each group has 11 or 12 students and meets once a week for 45 minutes at the end of the school day.

We feel it is important to have a division of activities; we have to fit into their world," Crowder said. They are pulled in so many different directions."

THINK HAPPY THOUGHTS

The program operates on a two-year cycle, so activities are not repeated. Each teacher gets a plan for the weeks activity the week before. All of the materials required for the activity are organized for the individual groups and teachers pick them up on the day of the activity.

The first-year program is based on the book *The 100 Simple Secrets of Happy People* by David Niven. Among the topics covered in seventh-grade advisories are cultivating new friendships, joining a group, accepting yourself, being positive, enjoying what you have, and sharing with others how important they are to you.

For one of the first activities, cultivate new friendships, each seventh grader is given a discover" card and paired with an eighth grader. The seventh graders receive a list of things they need to discover about their new school -- places, traditions, expectations, their personal plans for success, and resources. The eighth-grade mentors help students find the answers and remember them. Then for several days during the lunch period, Crowder sits in the cafeteria and asks the seventh graders about their discoveries. Correct answers earn a prize for the seventh grader and her mentor.

The groups also participate in an American Idol"- type presentation and stage performances during the advisory period as part of the listen to music activity.

For perspective, several 11th and 12th graders visit one period and talk about the things that made them happy when they were in seventh grade, as well as the concerns and fears they had.

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Each group also makes a scarecrow that best represents the advisory to decorate the school for Halloween. A prize is given to the best scarecrow.

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And to stress the importance of getting a good nights sleep, students are permitted to wear pajama bottoms and slippers to one advisory meeting and the school provides milk and cookies to help them relax. Each student writes a prayer, which the school compiles into books. Public school students could write poems or wish lists instead of prayers, Crowder noted.

EXPLORING CONNECTIONS

The eighth-grade advisory curriculum is based on the book *Connect: 12 Vital Ties That Open Your Heart, Lengthen Your Life, and Deepen Your Soul* by Edward M. Hallowell, M.D.

The activities are designed to show you can make positive changes in your life, Crowder noted. They are crafty with a purpose."

As in seventh grade, many of the activities focus on getting to know

oneself, appreciating other people, caring for animals, connecting with institutions, and thinking about the future.

One of the students favorite activities is making snuggles -- small security blankets for animals -- that are donated to the Humane Society of St. Louis. Many of the animals at the humane society were rescued from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, Crowder said. The rescued dogs and cats are sleeping on hard floors, and the blankets give them some comfort. Each student writes a short note to the animal to go with the snuggle.

Also, as part of the theme of appreciating animals, a woman who brings her three-legged dog to visit children in a local hospital talks about the work of therapy animals.

Parents of several students also are invited to one advisory meeting to talk about their careers, the tasks they complete each day, why they chose their career, and the education and preparation that was necessary for them to enter the field they chose.

The culminating activity for the eighth-grade advisories is making bracelets -- a group of boys might want to do something different, DiRollo noted. The girls are given an assortment of beads and each color or design represents each of the connections they studied. Students string together bracelets that show how those connections contribute to a rich and fulfilling life.

SETTING UP AN ADVISORY

The two also offered some suggestions for starting up a program -- including not being afraid to test and abandon ideas. We just plunged in without too much thought and made some mistakes," DiRollo joked about the launch of Villas advisories.

Administrators should be prepared for some resistance from teachers and students when the advisory idea is brought up. Teacher responses can include: Is this part of my contract?" I havent been trained in this!" and I cant do *one* more thing!" DiRollo said. Student complaints might include: We dont do anything in advisory." What does this have to do with anything?" Can I join Mrs. Smiths advisory -- they have food and fun."

Villas administration set some ground rules for the advisories, such as prohibiting students from doing homework or scheduling make-up tests during the advisory period. Students also are never moved from an advisory group.

One idea that was tried and eliminated was snacks for each advisory meeting. We didnt want food to be the main focus of the advisory activity," Crowder said. Now each student is allowed to bring in treats for her birthday, so the advisories have treats about 12 times a year.

Once an advisory program is started, it is important for administrators to talk about it in a positive way, DiRollo added.

She also recommended assigning someone at the central office level who can plan the advisory curriculum and have materials ready in advance for teachers. Teachers need to know what to do and why they are doing it."

DiRollo and Crowder work individually with new advisors to acquaint them with the program and to talk about group dynamics. School staff members also have ongoing conversations about advisory activities at seventh- and eighth-grade team meetings.

Administrators also need a method for evaluating the program, DiRollo noted. Advisors are asked to evaluate the program at years end. Student

input also is important. We assess the program each year by having each student complete a written evaluation," Crowder said. We describe each activity we completed during the year and ask them to rate how well the activity met the goals of the program. We also ask them to complete a few open-ended questions about the value of the program and their ideas for improvement."

Most of the activities developed for Villa Duchesnes advisories should work in co-ed public middle schools, said DiRollo, although she suggested setting up separate advisory groups for boys and girls.

You have to frame it so it is fun and also infuse it with things you think are important," said Crowder.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Advice About Middle School Advisories

The advisory period is the linchpin in the middle-school movement, some experts say. Many middle-school programs suffer from poorly implemented advisories, however. So what makes a successful advisory? Included: Activity ideas for improving advisories.

More Resources

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