

Increasing Teachers' Caring Potential Through Advising

by Nancy Rappaport

Adolescents tend to have few positive interactions with teachers outside of instruction and feel less secure with their teachers than younger students. Yet studies of social support demonstrate that perceived support from teachers is a significant predictor of young adolescents' motivation and academic success (Doll and Lyons 1998). To address these obstacles, educators have initiated many reform efforts to create more responsive school communities. It is estimated that about two-thirds of U.S. schools that include grade 7 use advising programs as a way for students to form close relationships with teachers.

Advising programs usually consist of a structured block of time during school hours, about 30 minutes each day, set aside for groups of 10 to 15 students to meet with a staff person, the advisor. The advisors will already know their advisees because the advisors will have them as students in their classes.

Unlike school counselors, who are in charge of supporting hundreds of students, advisors connect with individual students to provide academic and emotional support.

Some schools provide a structured curriculum for advising time that covers all or some of these issues:

- the personal relationship between the teacher and student;
- team building, community service, and consensus building;

- decision-making, communication skills, constructive goal planning, and career development;
- self-observation, assessment of behavior, and effective ways of studying;
- pertinent school information; and
- time for students to relax and socialize in the presence of a caring adult (Galassi, Gullede, and Cox 1998).

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It is often acknowledged that of all the innovations for adolescent education, advising programs are the most difficult to implement and to maintain. It is important that schools regard advising as protected time for student development and not as a dumping ground for ambitious agendas without proper attention to the resources and training required for success.

Staff: Your First Resource

The first step in implementing an advising program is to decide how staff members will participate in advising. If advising is voluntary, there is a greater chance of having enthusiastic teachers who are excited about the chance to be with their students. The disadvantage is that some of the most dedicated teachers may not volunteer because they are conscientious about the

added responsibility and don't want to overextend themselves. If the school compensates advisors with a reduced workload, some teachers will resent that they can't participate. Most schools use all their professional staff but face the concern that those teachers who are reluctant to advise may undermine the program's goals.

Schools can use their staff for advising programs in multiple ways. The school guidance counselors should be approached early in the developmental stages, as they will be more likely to see advising as complementary to their role. Counselors can serve as coordinators by providing orientation to advising, and collecting and generating curriculum materials. They also can act as a resource for teachers either by facilitating group supervision or co-leading advising groups.

It is also useful to appoint one person to the program who is the gatekeeper for advising information. This person keeps the advising schedule from being burdened with extraneous surveys, visits, and other activities that can water down a concerted effort to support students. The gatekeeper also coordinates outside resources, such as police officers, community employers, guidance counselors, and representatives from the high school who may be useful to advising groups.

Take Time for Training

The difficulty with sustaining advising is the individual questions, needs, and opinions that arise among teachers. Many teachers are uncomfortable with being advisors (Rappaport 2002). The balance between enough structure and responsiveness to students' requests becomes particularly trying for teachers who have difficulty with class management, organization, and ground rules in their ordinary classrooms.

Staff development for advisors includes training before the program begins and subsequent (ideally monthly) supervision and periodic inservice activities. Staff meetings should focus on achieving consensus about the objectives of advising and developing shared curriculum. Any professional development offered should address these issues:

- encouraging student reflection;
- changing group dynamics, especially to benefit marginalized students;
- motivating students;

- making advising time relevant to students;
- supporting different learning styles; and
- adapting an advising curriculum.

Pairing teachers with other advisors also provides an opportunity to build the skills of the less competent teacher. Providing forums for staff supervision through a consulting clinician, school psychologist, or counselor allows teachers to reflect on the group process, share their successes, and resolve difficult situations. For example, advisors can learn how to

respond to problematic group struggles through exploring how to create a positive peer group and how to redirect the negativity of certain students.

Currently, few advising programs evaluate their efforts, making it difficult to discern their impact. What little outcome data there is on advising efforts is largely consigned to unpublished reports. (Galassi, Gullede and Cox 1998; Rappaport 1999). Baseline and follow-up data needs to be collected to determine how advising programs are operating and to identify the range of effects they are

Principal *to* Principal

WE Asked:

How do you prepare students for the transition from elementary to middle school?

YOU Said:

In my former district, we planned a sixth-grade sleep-over. The evening included time for parents and students to tour the school, ask questions, and meet the staff. In addition, students participated in team-building and trust games. Movies and music were provided until lights-out at midnight. By the next morning, many of the children had made new friends and most of the concerns were addressed.

*Rachelle Tome, Principal
T. C. Hamlin School
Randolph, Maine*

All fifth-grade students are given a planner at the beginning of the school year to help with their organization. We also have departmentalized our fifth-grade teachers, so students are already accustomed to changing classes with each subject.

*Candy Bernsen, Principal
Jensen Elementary School
Pasadena, Texas*

Here are a couple of strategies we use:

- **Shadow Day:** This is a program where fifth graders shadow sixth graders for half a day to get a good sense of what life is like in sixth grade.

- **Picnic:** During this informal event for incoming sixth-grade students, faculty and administration answer questions and do presentations for parents while students participate in team-building activities.

- **Q and A:** During a specified period, sixth-grade students speak and answer questions from the fifth-grade class.

*Angie Crabtree, Director, Lower School
Webb School
Knoxville, Tennessee*

As a former middle school assistant principal, I found that fifth graders did not have adequate organizational skills and were not being held accountable for homework. When I became an elementary school principal, I began requiring all students in grades 3 through 5 to keep an agenda to help build the necessary organizational skills.

*Ginny Kishbauch, Principal
Cottonwood Canyon Elementary School
Lake Elsinore, California*

Our guidance counselors visit each elementary school armed with a set of lockers and a video produced by students. The video highlights a day at the middle school and the lockers are left at the school to allow the fifth graders time to practice working the combinations.

*Thomas Ferlick, Principal
Indian Middle School
Harleysville, Pennsylvania*

having. The absence of hard data leads to relying solely on anecdotes from students and teachers alike. With adequate support, including staffing, training, and evaluation, advising has the potential to foster healthy development and engage students in their learning communities.

References

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Advice for Advisors

My work with teacher-advisors has provided me with a unique opportunity to hear from practitioners about what makes advisors and advisory programs successful. Here is some of their advice:

For Advisors

Be yourself and avoid being self-conscious.

Here is a good way to "open the door" with a new advisory group: Bring in a picture of yourself at the same age as your advisees. Discuss who you were and what you were like. Then assign your advisees to bring in their own baby pictures and tell a little about themselves.

Build and enjoy routines and rituals. As much as adolescents complain about routines and rituals, they actually thrive on them. On Monday mornings, have the group share events of the weekend. Later in the week, check assignment books. Play games on Fridays, celebrate birthdays, and recognize student successes.

Have advisory partners. Different advisory groups enjoy working and playing together. Partner with another advisory group to work on larger service projects, allow for friendly competition, and review for tests.

Know your limitations. As guides, advisors direct students to expert resources within the school; they never replace the experts.

For Principals

Balance knowledge with autonomy. This is all about knowing what to do, then having the freedom to provide what your advisors need. Some recommended ways to gain this knowledge are to visit successful advisory

programs in nearby schools; attend middle-grades conferences for up-to-date advisory information; and get together with other advisors to discuss expert advice, read and respond to literature, and share successes and pitfalls.

Use time of day to your advantage. The advisors I hear from say that the best times for meetings are either first thing in the morning or during a mid-morning break. Keep in mind that when you meet could impact who can meet. Pick a time that best suits your school and have advisors use other techniques to make those meetings successful.

Focus on just a few goals and publicize them. In successful advisory groups, everyone plays from the "same sheet of music." Everyone involved—teachers, students, administrators, and parents—should clearly know what the groups are trying to accomplish and be willing to help.

Offer support. To be successful, advisors and advisory programs need the support of the principal. Principals who champion these programs are directly involved by either serving as advisors or frequently visiting with advisory groups. To help advisory programs succeed, principals can find and allocate funds, provide staff development, or simply be responsive to staff concerns.

Being a good advisor takes dedication and hard work. By using these techniques and listening to the advice of other advisors, your school will have a great program staffed by wonderful advisors.

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