

Schools have increasingly implemented advising programs as a means of linking students with caring adults. Although this approach is promising, its success depends on adequate funding; the full commitment of administration, staff, and parents; and a thoughtful definition of the procedures for achieving the goals.

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Can advising lead to meaningful relationships?

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MENTORING PROGRAMS are often enthusiastically endorsed by community organizations, corporations, and government entities as an effective way to nurture children. However, vulnerable children who frequently have positive mentoring experiences show only modest improvement in academic performance, self-esteem, and school attendance, and this illustrates the need for guarded optimism.¹ Even in the best of circumstances, when mentors are carefully trained and matched with children, these types of one-on-one relationships are challenging to sustain.² Simply put, relationships between children and mentors have limitations stemming from logistical difficulties, a dearth of qualified volunteers, the absence of a prior history, and so on. Often, they can seem contrived and therefore susceptible to premature termination.³

Obstacles to student-teacher bonding in traditional schools

Given that children spend the majority of the day in a school setting, researchers and program developers have sought to forge constructive relationships in this environment as an alternative to mentoring.^{4,5} Many elementary schools have successfully provided students and teachers with opportunities to build and maintain relationships. A quality of caring and attentiveness pervades these schools, as does the recognition that relationships with adults are critical in children's development.⁶

Unfortunately, many schools, especially middle schools and high schools, are structured in ways that make it difficult for students to develop stable relationships with teachers.⁷ Researchers have noted that middle school students tend to have few positive interactions with teachers outside of instruction and feel less secure with their teachers than do children in elementary school.⁸ The growing emphasis on standardized testing in middle and high school often gives rise to rigid curricular demands that constrain teachers and leave little room for the kinds of activities that typically draw them closer to their students. The structure of middle schools often prevents the formation of genuine, trusting relationships between teachers and students.^{9,10} Yet studies of social support demonstrate that perceived support from teachers is a significant predictor of young adolescents' motivation and academic successes.⁵

To address these obstacles, educators have tried to initiate some structural school reform efforts to create more responsive school communities. They have used school reform efforts that address school and classroom climate. They have also played host to school-based mentoring programs, which are coordinated internally or sponsored through intermediaries like Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. Yet the orchestration of thousands of pairings of mentoring relationships for students presents substantial difficulties in any educational environment. The number of students in need of warm supportive adults far exceeds the availability of vol-

unteers who are willing to give up a portion of their workday to meet on school grounds.

Strengths and weaknesses of school advising programs

A more practical approach might be to increase the capacity for caring, stable, informal interactions within school settings by fortifying existing ties. To this end, advising programs have proliferated in many schools as an institutional antidote to the lack of opportunities for students to form close relationships with teachers. Leading professional organizations have endorsed advising programs as a promising way to allow every student to be known by a caring adult.¹¹ About two-thirds of the schools in the United States that include grade seven have one homeroom or group advisory period, although no accurate national data exist concerning the precise prevalence of advising. In one survey of approximately two thousand school principals, advising programs were found most frequently in schools in the Northeast, in urban areas with higher percentages of minority students and school families below the poverty line.¹²

Calculating the frequency of advising programs is further complicated by the fact that the term *advising* has no universal definition.¹³ Advisers at some schools meet weekly with students and cover administrative tasks, whereas other advisers meet daily and provide social and emotional support. The only common denominator is that the students are a captive audience and that the advising occurs during the school day, usually drawing on teachers to be the advisers. Although the content varies in terms of the emphasis on educational or social goals, ideally the adviser provides emotional grounding and acts as a role model. Usually, advisers are primarily responsible for a small group of ten to fifteen students.

In alternative public schools and private schools, well-planned advising programs have made a difference in students' engaged behavior and student performance, and financial and staff resources

are allocated to sustain this type of support.¹⁴ These schools are less restrained by the economics of providing the smaller teacher-student ratios that allow the teachers to take on this additional responsibility.² However, the larger advising movement in public schools has not been consistently executed, funded, or sufficiently evaluated to ensure similar success. Teachers and administrators in such schools sometimes resist efforts that they view to be too big a drain on resources or as destabilizing to the system.⁹

As with many other educational reforms,¹⁰ advising was adopted in many schools with little attention to the infrastructure required or with any means of evaluation. Advising programs, for example, require a significant reallocation of resources, time, and staff professional development to expand teachers' roles.¹⁵ Moreover, few programs evaluated their efforts. Indeed, a survey of nineteen hundred schools showed that 47 percent of schools initiated advising in fifth through ninth grade, yet what little outcome data were collected on their efforts is largely consigned to unpublished reports.^{13,16} The published data are usually brief surveys and do not capture how the advising relationships influence students' behavior. Primarily, information available focuses on the logistical steps for implementing advising and examines how schools prioritize what gets covered in advising.¹³ Although the information makes frequent references to the importance of the adviser's understanding of child development and group dynamics,^{17,18} it gives no guidelines that effectively assess the differences between successful and failed advising efforts.

Enhancing the capacity of large public schools to promote teacher-student relationships through advising is a complicated process, and numerous challenges remain. This chapter draws on my experience, systematic process observation of groups, and ongoing focus groups with support staff in an urban high school that has tried to institutionalize caring and enhance student engagement by implementing an advising program. My observations as a child and adolescent psychiatrist highlight important questions about the nature of the mentoring relationship as well as the predictable

obstacles and necessary commitment of all parties as crucial to sustain an advising program. These observations provide a gateway to the discussion of the types of obstacles that schools may confront, and may ultimately lead to qualitative descriptions of successful advising groups.

The study

For the past six years, an urban public high school in a Northeastern city adjacent to a university has made a concerted effort to provide an advising program for its students. The initiative is based on the premise that constructive relationships between students and adults can enhance learning. The belief has firm grounding in the research literature, which has consistently highlighted the protective benefits of support relationships.¹⁹ The impetus for this effort stemmed from recognition of the vulnerabilities of the diverse body of students attending the high school. A districtwide analysis of school performance revealed that approximately one-third of the students fail at least one course every semester. The failure rate for minorities was even higher: 41 percent for African American students and 43 percent for Latino students. Of the more than two thousand students who attended the public high school, approximately 60 percent are racial or ethnic minorities; more than half are eligible to receive free lunches; and one-third speak a first language other than English.

The advising program is being phased in as part of ongoing restructuring, which includes heterogeneous student grouping, interdisciplinary teaming, and structured time for staff collaboration. The advising has expanded to all four years, and school personnel anticipate that the adviser will stay with the same students for the duration of their enrollment at the high school. The students see their advisers two days a week during a regular class period. The evaluation of the program has revealed promising preliminary findings, including high satisfaction ratings from teachers

and students alike. We are currently tracking a broader range of indices (for example, grade point average, suspensions, and detentions) that are assumed to be linked to the redesign efforts. In the following sections, I will describe several of the issues that arose throughout the implementation process. My hope is that these observations will help to create a research agenda for this important educational reform.

Implementation challenges

Leadership

The success of the advising process appears to depend to a large extent on whether the program has a leader who champions the cause and tenaciously works through the obstacles and logistics. This leader can keep the process energized and strategize about how to overcome the structural impediments that inevitably arise when institutional inertia impedes the school innovation. As McDonald points out, in successful redesign efforts the committed leader must take actions in small incremental steps, exercise charisma, possess an almost evangelical faith balanced with skepticism, and encourage a certain defiance of the status quo.²⁰ The leader must also hold a position of power in order to maintain the vision while attending to the myriad of details that can derail the systemic advising effort.

Ideally, students should be assigned to advisers who will already see them during the course of the school day in academic courses, homerooms, or cocurricular activities.²¹ Also ideally, schools would have the resources to choose staff members to participate in advising according to each school's values. But in reality, resources are limited, and public schools are under pressure to keep a tight schedule and justify that time is spent on learning, in accordance with state directives. Advising programs can succeed in such an environment only with active, consistent leadership.

Many of the ills of an advising effort saddled with poor leadership became evident over the years of this study. To begin, this high

school has had four different principals in eight years, generally contributing to the rhetorical endorsement of advising without overseeing adequate and consistent implementation. Because of the flexible nature of advising, the time tended to become a dumping ground for ambitious agendas without proper attention to the resources and training required to provide competent execution. One year, the advising time was used partly for preparation for high-stakes standardized tests, with no guidance for advisers as to how to manage this. Another year, the scheduling was so difficult that as many as twenty-eight students were in each group, far more than the recognized ideal size of eight to twelve.²² Advising, like mentoring, is hard work. If leadership is insufficient to provide the infrastructure to bring staff and students together, then the half-hearted advising effort that will no doubt arise can contribute to pervasive cynicism. This inconsistent effort presents the deceptively complacent facade that an innovation is being executed, even when it is fundamentally and fatally flawed.

The importance of leaders' active facilitation and attention to detail is illustrated in the following vignette, in which an advising effort actually reinforces the marginalization of disengaged students. I was observing a group of eighteen high school students as an adviser valiantly tried to maintain a coherent discussion about discipline and graduation requirements. During the session, I identified seven informal ringleaders who had bonded over derailing any positive interaction with the adviser, disrupting the class by ripping up paper and dropping their pencils. Dealing with one troublemaker is challenging enough; with seven, it is almost impossible. After the session, the adviser, a seasoned veteran teacher, expressed her disillusionment at the possibility of connecting to these students. I explored with her various possibilities, but emphasized that she must divide the group into two. Fortunately, she was committed enough to be willing to give up her prep period to make this possible. But for three weeks, despite persistent appeals and directives from the principal, the assistant principal did not generate the changed schedule for the students.

Finally, the groups were divided. The adviser subsequently discovered that she was then able to motivate these students, including one student who later came with the adviser to a school committee to give a testimonial. He told the committee that advising was his first positive experience in school. He grew up in a neighborhood where drug dealing was a major occupation. His adviser was the only adult who had encouraged him to invest in school and take academic risks; he was able to do this because she cared. This example reflects the tenuous nature of advising. A school needs to be flexible when relationships are in trouble and provide leadership to recognize the necessary modifications of structure.

Addressing school structure, culture, and climate

Advising is easier to implement if the school not only examines the rules and roles of advisers but also explores the school's unconscious and conscious resistance to setting aside time for this activity. To the extent that administrators convey reluctance, beliefs and values undermine positive relationships with students. Researchers usually recommend that schools allocate anywhere from six months to two years of preparation before starting advising, in order to assess teacher skill level, outline increased responsibilities, and develop the advising curriculum.¹⁶ But despite this preparation, advising programs still often have difficult beginnings or are eventually dropped. Many people acknowledge that of all the innovations introduced in middle schools, adviser-advisee programs are the most difficult to implement and to maintain.¹⁷

In examining the difficulty of sustaining educational innovations, one must pay greater attention to the individual questions, needs, and opinions that arise among teachers in response to the innovations.²³ Many teachers have a level of discomfort about being advisers. Their reluctance may originate from multiple concerns: they are inadequately prepared, lack the necessary skills, or perhaps are unclear about what is expected from them. Other reasons for this lack of enthusiasm

include inadequate staff development, reluctance to stray from teaching subject matter, or the fact that some teachers just do not want to be forced to share with their students.²² Some staff are reluctant to invest emotionally in students. Some worry about balancing sympathy to students' barriers to learning with the necessity to uphold stringent academic standards. Also, some teachers see it as problematic and contrived to create artificial emphasis on emotional bonding, as it erodes formal boundaries and emphasis on the teachers' tasks of imparting knowledge and necessary skills. They may feel that the process of building strong connections to students should derive from sharing enthusiasm about the subject matter and class participation instead of isolating out the advising from the student performance.

Adopting advising in a school can also be threatening because it evokes latent anxieties about the school's difficulties. Powell examined an all-school effort to alter school culture, called Family Group, which structured groups facilitated by school adults.¹⁸ She interpreted the school staff's reluctance to change as a fear of losing the social distance offered by a school's administrative roles to manage strong feelings, anxiety, and unspoken difficulties. This social defense promotes policies and responses that maintain the status quo, and it maintains structural barriers that interfere with building strong teacher-student bonds. In determining the readiness of a school to adopt advising, understanding the characteristics of the staff and designing the infrastructure to address their concerns are useful. Schools must provide a forum for meaningful discussions in which staff can explore their apprehensions. In fact, such forums can serve as a template for staff in the construction of their advising discussion with students. In weekly focus groups that I led for two years, many teachers shared feelings of being devalued, overwhelmed, and tired. They approached students with a level of resignation and futility because they lacked the needed support from the broader system. Many veteran teachers told me that whereas they once invested time and effort in building relationships with students, they now felt more consumed by responsibilities such as caring for their own young children or elderly parents.

Creating a protected time in which teachers could reflect on these feelings served ultimately to increase their investment and generosity with students.

At this high school, teachers and administrators had the opportunity to discuss and explore the problems they anticipated confronting with their students in advising. Some teachers worried that if students did not have definite guidelines, in an unstructured setting they would reveal overwhelmingly intimate details about their lives (for example, abuse, abortions). Some school committee members and parents angrily believed that this initiative was a surreptitious effort by school adults to supplant the role of the family.

Nevertheless, the program went forward, and what really happened was the opposite of what many feared. When teachers started advising groups of students, it was the teenagers who were cautious and did not share readily. The most common problem for advisers in fact was not an outpouring of deep secrets but rather dealing with the suspicious silence they encountered in 80 percent of groups in the initial phase.¹⁵

Unfortunately, this was an attitude that the advisers themselves sometimes fostered. One adviser decided to wait almost two months to see how long it would take for the advisees in her group even to introduce themselves to each other. She seemed almost to revel in the futility of students taking the initiative, let alone developing meaningful relationships. This seemingly puzzling response becomes clearer if we interpret it as acknowledging that schools may be unconsciously designed to keep students at a distance and that some teachers are happy to perpetuate this standoff.

Another aspect of understanding the readiness of schools to adopt an advising program is to analyze the school climate, particularly with respect to power dynamics and the process of decision making. Schools have a variety of operating principles that both reflect and contribute to the interpersonal climate within them. For example, Tremlow and colleagues evaluate the covert power dynamic present in schools that are experiencing violence.²⁴ This power dynamic may be subtle and unconsciously motivated, and it may pervade all levels,

wherein students, teachers, and administrators "abusively coerce others repeatedly through humiliation and mockery; the stronger, more dominant personality coercing a weaker, more submissive personality." Staff members may consciously or unconsciously participate in escalating conflict, and schools often do not hold them responsible for their actions.²⁵ Thus, in fortifying the role between teachers and students, identifying cases of a covert power dynamic in which violent students are implicitly mirroring the aggressive climate that staff can sometimes perpetuate can be helpful.

A critical aspect of adolescents' development is how they see themselves as alternating between omnipotent, powerful, and powerless.²⁶ A useful step in advising is to explore how power is distributed in the school so that students can analyze their perceptions about power. This kind of discussion can facilitate students developing their sense of self-efficacy.²⁷ In my observations of advising groups, a recurrent theme was students' discussion about their perceived sense of injustice in the school or their conflict with certain teachers. Some teachers struggled with the notion that if they explored this with students, they were betraying their colleagues' confidence and endorsing students' belligerent attitudes. (One teacher went so far as to eavesdrop on another adviser and then express outrage that this adviser initiated a discussion about the students' worst experiences with teachers.)

In my observation of an advising group, I have found that open discussion can have positive results. One teacher was particularly adept at examining the students' interpretation of the power dynamics operating in the school. His approach was to listen to students' challenge of authority. He did not feel compelled to fix their struggle but encouraged students to take initiative. The teacher asked, "Who has had trouble with a teacher?" The students all became animated, and everyone raised his or her hand. Students began to yell out names, but the adviser was firm that he did not want to hear names of teachers. A quiet girl asked, "What do you do if a teacher is rude and seems to single you out?" The adviser corrected her by saying that the student feels that the teacher is rude. The student persisted and said that no, the teacher was rude.

Another student said, "Fire her. She is a bad teacher." The adviser wittily replied, "And I am sure that you are all angels," gently reminding them thus that there are two sides to every story. He then suggested that the key to resolving a conflict is finding the right timing and offered himself as an ally. He also suggested that students not be insulting and that they try to stick to concrete examples. So even though a group may not come to any resolution, ongoing advising meetings can offer opportunities for students to explore constructive ways of problem solving in the presence of an attentive adult.

Another of the great challenges facing advising innovation is that an evaluation of its successes is often held to an unfairly high standard. A key discussion centers on the feedback loop or how the school community decides who is competent or available to participate in advising. Ten years ago, the former superintendent put a halt to the entire program because she saw a few teachers at a local coffee shop at a time when they should have been conducting advising. During the more recent advising initiative that I observed, many teachers were concerned that an adviser was using the advising time for a glorified study hall. It seems curious that the administrators so quickly jumped to these incidents as an impetus to close down shop rather than an added incentive to monitor and support advisers. These aberrant advisers acted as a lightning rod for institutional ambivalence.

This ambivalence is paralleled by the anger, disappointment, and paralysis that students feel when they have incompetent advisers. As in mentoring, advising relationships lie along a vast continuum, and schools must not endorse or perpetuate a charade of commitment when, in fact, the adults' involvement is reluctant, disengaged, or unpredictable. Frequently, students at the high school complained that advising was a waste of time, that nothing was accomplished in the process. I found that usually it was the teachers who had difficulty with class management, organization, and ground rules in their ordinary classrooms who could not create an emotional home base in their advising groups. In one situation I observed, students recognized

that their adviser was problematic because she had already been transferred from five schools. Although the students did not want to hurt the adviser's feelings and knew she did not take criticism well, they felt that she yelled too much. Sadly, they also recognized that they needed an adult to help them listen to each other and prepare them to do well academically. This case illustrates the fact that for advising to be successful, schools must install a reliable system for receiving and dealing with feedback from students.

Although some advisers may be uncomfortable with the sense of trying to win a popularity contest with their students, schools would be prudent to develop mechanisms for both observation and feedback. The absence of data to quantify predictably successful advising relationships has led to an overreliance on anecdotes from students and teachers alike. Evaluations of mentoring programs suggest that modest expectations are in order, as the proportion of matches that turn into significant relationships is at best between one-third to two-thirds overall.²

Supervision

Another challenge the advising relationship presents is providing assistance to the advisers themselves. Without adequate supervision, advisers might still provide students guidance but be unable to address and resolve difficult situations. I found many teachers aware of this weakness and receptive to suggestions about how to handle personality conflicts or challenging students. Often, advisers appreciated the opportunity for supervision when teacher-student relationships were particularly threatened. Sometimes, participating in role modeling in which a group of teachers could act out particularly difficult situations operated as the impetus for reflection. Other times, teachers would share their reaction to various predictable stages of the year, such as the end of the school year. They could then use their insight to respond more empathetically to the emotions their students were experiencing. In still another case,

when an advising group was in crisis, drawing on the resources of a clinician to examine the problematic situation provided the necessary momentum to turn it around.

Advisers sometimes preferred not to discuss feelings of ambivalence or frustration with the process, perhaps in the hopes that these would eventually dissipate. An example was an adviser who was injured when he was trying to protect two students in a fight that broke out during an advising period. After returning to the group, the adviser chose not to address the fight with students because he was not sure what to say. The group had been functioning well, but increasingly students were excusing themselves early to go to lunch and avoiding any controversial topic. When I discussed with the adviser his concerns, he said that he was ambivalent. The expelled student had violated a school rule and injured the teacher, but he had been under tremendous pressure. His father was awaiting a transplant, and a snide remark by another student provoked him. The adviser did not want to excuse the assault, but he felt sympathetic to the student and did not want the situation to escalate. With my encouragement, he revisited with the group the ground rules for safety, explained the fighting incident, and shared his sadness. The group was then able to reestablish a level of cohesiveness and use the incident as a catalyst for a productive discussion about anger.

Final implications

When a school institutes advising to provide caring, how this time will be used is not always predictable. Once in a while, staff and students use it as a venue for profound discourse where meaningful exchanges occur. It is important not to treat these moments as happenstance but to realize that the opportunity arises out of the school's preparation and investment in shifting how the teachers and students see each other. In one group I observed, an adviser had inoperable cancer. Despite his illness, he was primarily concerned

about providing for his advisees. The contract between the students and this teacher was that the students recognized that his caring for them as he was dying motivated them to invest in their future.

The effort of school communities to build strong relationships is a worthwhile endeavor, although the jury is still out on how many will ultimately succeed. As with mentoring programs, the success of advising programs is likely to hinge on the extent to which school personnel make a commitment to developing strong, sustained relationships and to putting in place the necessary resources to ensure adequate infrastructure, supervision, and thoughtful analysis. Within this context, baseline and follow-up data need to be collected to determine how advising programs are operating and to identify the range of effects they are having. Finally, it would be useful to have qualitative descriptions of successful advising groups. Journals and field notes by teachers and students can provide insights into how change occurs. Adequately supported, this type of school effort has the potential to address the needs of adolescents for meaningful connections with supportive adults.

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