

## Small Advising Groups: Relationships for Success

*Research shows that when students and adults in a school have strong relationships, learning is enhanced and students care more about what they are learning, study more, and go on to pursue higher education.*

BY NANCY RAPPAPORT

Getting a good high school education is more important than ever, yet many urban adolescents continue to do poorly. They skip classes, fail courses, and show many other signs of apathy toward academics. Teachers and administrators are searching for new effective ways to motivate students to care about their education. In small alternative high schools, well-planned advising programs have made a difference in outcomes for at-risk students. But in larger public high schools advising programs are not consistently executed, sufficiently evaluated, or in most cases tried at all.

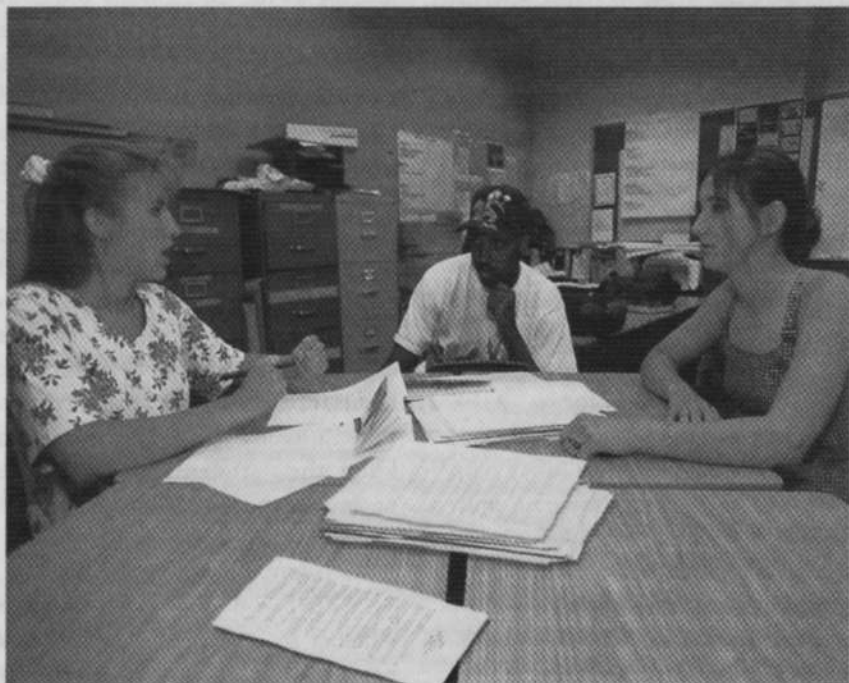
This makes what is happening at Cambridge (Mass.) Rindge and Latin High School (CRLS), a large public high school, worthy of attention. For the past five years, CRLS has made a concerted effort to provide an advising program for their students based on the premise that constructive relationships between students and adults at school can enhance learning. It is a challenging environment for such a program. The 1997–1998 Cambridge public schools data reveals that about a third (32 percent) of all students fail at least one course every semester at CRLS. The failure rate for minorities is even higher—41 percent for African American students and 43 percent for

Latino students. Of the approximately 2,000 students who attend CRLS, 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 at CRLS is being phased in as part of ongoing restructuring and is currently limited to ninth graders who see advisers one day a week during a regular class

period. In evaluations of the CRLS program, a majority of advisers say it is a powerful way to build a connection with their students. Eighty percent of students report their advisers are strong advocates in the school. The principal reports that the ninth graders had fewer disciplinary problems and an easier time making the transition to the high school. We're just beginning to look at broader measures, such as GPA, changes in suspension, and detentions, recognizing that this is time consuming and costly.

We have heard from around the country that most advising programs in public schools never get off the ground and are difficult to sustain. As a child psychiatrist and consultant to the CRLS advising staff for the last five years, I have tried to learn from the challenges we have confronted at CRLS. These ideas will help schools that want to adapt an advising program be aware of the critical decisions they must make: finding time in the schedule, determining which students to include, curriculum content, and staff support. >>



# CURRICULUM REPORT

(continued)

## Scheduling

Trying to carve out time in the schedule for advising can be difficult. Public schools are under pressure to keep a tight schedule and justify time-on-learning in accordance with state directives. Currently, we can only do one day a week, so it is critical to have

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students assigned to advisers they are likely to see during the course of the school day in homerooms, academic courses, or cocurricular activities. The consensus from teachers is that small groups of eight to twelve students are most conducive to meaningful discussion and allow teachers to make a more significant investment. Additionally, students expressed a desire in evaluations to have one-on-one time so individual meetings need to be built into the advising schedule. A guest speaker during the advising period can provide an opportunity for the adviser to meet individually with students. This personal attention allows students to better utilize advising time and to set priorities and change study patterns. Students have also shown a keen interest in knowing about and participating in decisions about school change. The principal visits all the advising groups, using the forum to talk about anticipated changes that may affect students' school lives and to get their input.

## Guidance Counselor Involvement

Schools have multiple safety nets; therefore, the advising program must be well integrated with other services in the school. In our experience, the guidance counselors should be approached early so they will see advising as a complement to their role, not

a threat to their job security. Guidance counselors usually carry a load of 150–250 students and welcome access to advising groups because they offer an efficient way to deliver information. In our program, guidance counselors present concrete information about graduation requirements,

transcripts, goal setting, and course selection three times a year to each advising group.

## Staff Participation

Schools must decide which staff members should participate in advising according to their values and resources. If the advisers are voluntary, as they are at CRLS, it clearly means that 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 meeting all the requirements and don't want to overextend themselves. If the school compensates the advisers with a reduced workload, some teachers will resent that they can't participate because there is too much demand for them to teach (in terms of staff allocation). As part of the restructuring process at CRLS, the principal will require that all teachers participate in advising. Although this is an honorable expectation, there is some concern that those teachers who are reluctant to participate may not make the effort to know their students and therefore undermine the goals of advising.

## Student Selection

Another decision we faced is whether to involve all students in a preventive program or to select only

those students at risk. Those who argued that advising should be reserved for high-risk students saw it as overkill to provide advising for stable, directed students who would be better served by focusing on academics. The additional concern was that students could be forced to work with an adviser they didn't like.

The proponents of including all students in advising program gave several arguments. They saw advising as a preventive intervention; to preselect students would defeat this purpose. Many students who needed to examine their attitudes toward learning and their investment in school—the very students we needed to engage—might choose not to participate. Also, by selecting only non-achieving students for the advising program, we would run the risk of stigmatizing them and making them feel more inadequate. We decided if the goal is to build on students' strengths, all students will have something to offer; the benefit of self-reflection on learning goals, needs and experiences at school is not reserved for failing students.

CRLS resolved this conflict by making a reasonable compromise. All students were expected to participate, but there was a mechanism for students to opt out after meeting with an administrator. Some administrators thought we would have a mass exodus of students opting out, but only two students went through the formal route of opting out.

## A Formal Curriculum

Our decision to write a formal curriculum came out of concerns raised in the first year of the program. Although students enjoyed meeting with advisers, they saw little connection between advising and academics. Our goal in the curriculum is to help students make a smooth transition to CRLS in two basic areas—orientation and academic

support. In orientation, they learn to locate key areas in the high school, to understand the roles of adults in the building, to understand the rules and policies (especially the policies about attendance, school tardiness, and graduation requirements), to begin charting self-progress, and to ask for support from teachers when needed. Academic support includes effective organizational strategies to keep up with classes, an introduction to time management, and identification of learning styles and potential career interests. The curriculum is ideally used as the scaffolding to build a caring relationship by conveying information and showing interest in students' decisions.

In evaluating the program and conducting interviews with the advisers, it was revealed that some advisers needed more guidance on prioritizing what needed to be covered in the curriculum. Advisers needed to be more familiar with emphasizing curriculum components such as learning styles, time management, and problem solving. Many of these activities involve developing skills that take time for students and involve repetition. There is a persistent tension between giving advisers the flexibility to design their own advising and assisting those who want much more direction. Trying to standardize the curriculum while leaving room for spontaneity and creativity of the teachers is a challenge.

#### Staff Support

After four years, we've realized that staff development needs to include opportunities for teachers to collaborate with each other. This is particularly important as teachers consider classroom management skills appropriate for the diverse students they have each year. After experimenting with several formats that included afternoon workshops featuring inspirational speakers from outside the

school, we shifted our focus to give advisers, guidance counselors, and administrators time each week to meet and share how they ran their groups and planning time for upcoming events.

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I support all these groups as needed, and observe each adviser's group to offer concrete strategies about engaging the group. In addition, some groups have very complex students who challenge the best of teachers, so I often collaborate to see if there are viable alternatives for

reaching these students. Sometimes, my role is to advocate for this protected advising time and also to maintain realistic administrative expectations so advising does not become the quick fix for the intractable problems in the school. A well-executed consistent proactive advising program can create sense of efficacy for teachers who are struggling to engage students. When advising is working, students are taking risks to challenge themselves academically, to know themselves as learners, to recognize what gets them stuck in school life, and to explore healthy alternatives when they face adversity.

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