

A Tale of Two High School Advisory Programs



By **Meenoo Rami** June 18, 2013 9:00 am



Most high schools have some sort of advisory program built into their ecology—a time when a group of students gather to check in with a teacher. At some schools, “advisory” is referred to as “homeroom” or “study hall.” But how advisory is used in schools to support students varies greatly. Consider these two snapshots of advisories in action:

Scenario #1

It’s a little after 8 a.m. and students file randomly into an advisory period, where they are greeted with a sign-in sheet. Most are on cell phones. They rarely take the time to interact with the teacher or other students in the classroom. Meanwhile, the teacher is trying to find a way to make copies for his first period class, remove the coffee stain from his tie and monitor who has or hasn’t signed the attendance sheet. In 12 minutes, when advisory ends, the work of the school day will begin and students will head off into their first period classes.

Scenario #2

It’s a little after 3 p.m. and students arrive at their advisory period after a long day at school. They pile onto a couch and a couple of chairs in the back of the room and the teacher begins by asking for good news. Students share highlights from school and home—laughter, jokes and mild jabs fill the conversation, but everyone gets a turn. Eventually, the advisor shares the college and career exploration plan and asks

each student to log into an online system that will help them track this process over the next two years. The first step? An online personality and interest survey.

What's the purpose of advisory?

In those two scenarios, students and teachers experience the advisory period in two vastly different ways for vastly different purposes. In some schools, advisory is treated as a time to monitor attendance. At my school, the Science Leadership Academy (SLA), advisory is something else altogether.

Chris Lehmann, SLA's founding principal, believes that student-teacher relationships radiate from the advisory period: "Think of advisory as the soul of your school. And in everything you do, remember that you teach students before you teach subjects. Advisory is the place in the schedule where that idea has its core and then it spreads into everything else we do."

How my school makes the most of advisory periods

At SLA, advisory is treated as a course, and the advisor serves as the advocate for the student and point-person for the family within the school. Advisors follow the same group from ninth to twelfth grade and spend two 40-minute periods with them each week. Here's what my colleagues say about how they use advisory to build a culture of mutual care and self-advocacy amongst their students.

Ms. Thompson: "We occasionally do shout-outs where students share reasons that other people have been awesome. For instance, they might give a shout out to someone who participated in a talent show, or who tutored them, etc. This helps build community within the advisory."

Mr. Herman: "I have witnessed and experienced us rally around one another in so many different ways to ensure that no one feels alone in the process of overcoming adversity. And this doesn't just pertain to the kids. They have done it for me too. We can now sense when someone is struggling, and we drop what we have going on to make sure we are there for one another."

Mr. VanKouwenberg: "I like to start with a few minutes of electronics-free 'good news and concerns' where students can say things of which they are proud and also raise concerns that are specific to them or systemic."

Ms. Dunn: "Celebrations—no event is too small to celebrate: birthdays of the month, international holiday food celebration & gift exchange, snack times, taking snacks outside, etc."

How does advisory work in your school? What do you do—or what would you like to do—to build community-building and support into your school's structure? I look forward to your great ideas.



Vee Riley Jan 26, 2015 8:06pm

Gabriela, my previous school adopted the same approach as yours to advisory. Although the time in the morning was useful to share notices and quickly check in with the students, it was unfortunately guilty of matching 'scenario one' at times. At my new school they have a 50 minute advisory class every day. The class is team-taught, and has no curriculum documents. I am hopeful to create a learning environment like 'scenario two,' and look forward to using strategies like shout outs, celebrations and check in and support. If anyone has any other idea for community-building, I would be very eager to learn from your experience!



Gabriela Correa Jun 19, 2013 1:08pm

In my school, each group has its own advisor or tutor. We spend together the first 15 minutes every day. The advisor calls the roll and asks students about their work for the day, oncoming tests or any news they might have. On Wednesdays, we share a 40'period in which we do activities which will help bring the group together. Community service, antibullying campaigns, time-management, integrating new students into the group, exercises in empathy; these are some of the issues we usually deal with in Middle School advisory.