

# Seniors Take the LEAD

*Maureen Cohen*

**M**any school leaders seek new strategies from their colleagues and education literature on how to develop and sustain a positive school culture where students feel safe and are able to reach their greatest potential in academic achievement. Leadership books focus on strategies of building professional learning communities and developing capacity among school educators. But the literature often leaves out one essential element: the role of the students. The Grafton (MA) High School community asked the question, What would happen if school leaders focused on bringing students into conversations in the professional learning community and developed their capacities for leadership?

At Grafton, the senior leader program is at the heart of building students' leadership capacity. Every year, between 50 and 60 rising seniors participate in the annual senior leader training with great enthusiasm. At the beginning of each training session, school leaders tell the seniors, "Remember that the principal and the assistant principal don't create the culture of the school. All of you and your leadership do. The other students look to the seniors to understand what we value at Grafton. They look to you

to know how to act."

In April, applications are distributed to juniors who are interested in being senior leaders. In their applications, they share their leadership strengths and commit to attending a summer training and grade 9 orientation day. About 60 students apply every year, which is about 40% of the class. Because so many students in the senior class participate in the program, the senior leaders come from all groups in the student body. That diversity is a great strength of the program.

## **Freshman Advisory Program**

The senior leaders are involved in the school in a number of ways. They participate on interview committees, read announcements, lead tours, and coordinate the freshman orientation day. But first and foremost, they are the facilitators of Grafton's freshman advisory program.

Starting in 2006, a committee of faculty members and administrators met for a year to develop a freshman advisory program to help students transition from the eighth grade to the ninth grade. This committee worked collaboratively to develop a structure, curriculum, and vision for the program.

**Senior leaders facilitate grade 9 advisories and build their own leadership skills through their training and practice.**

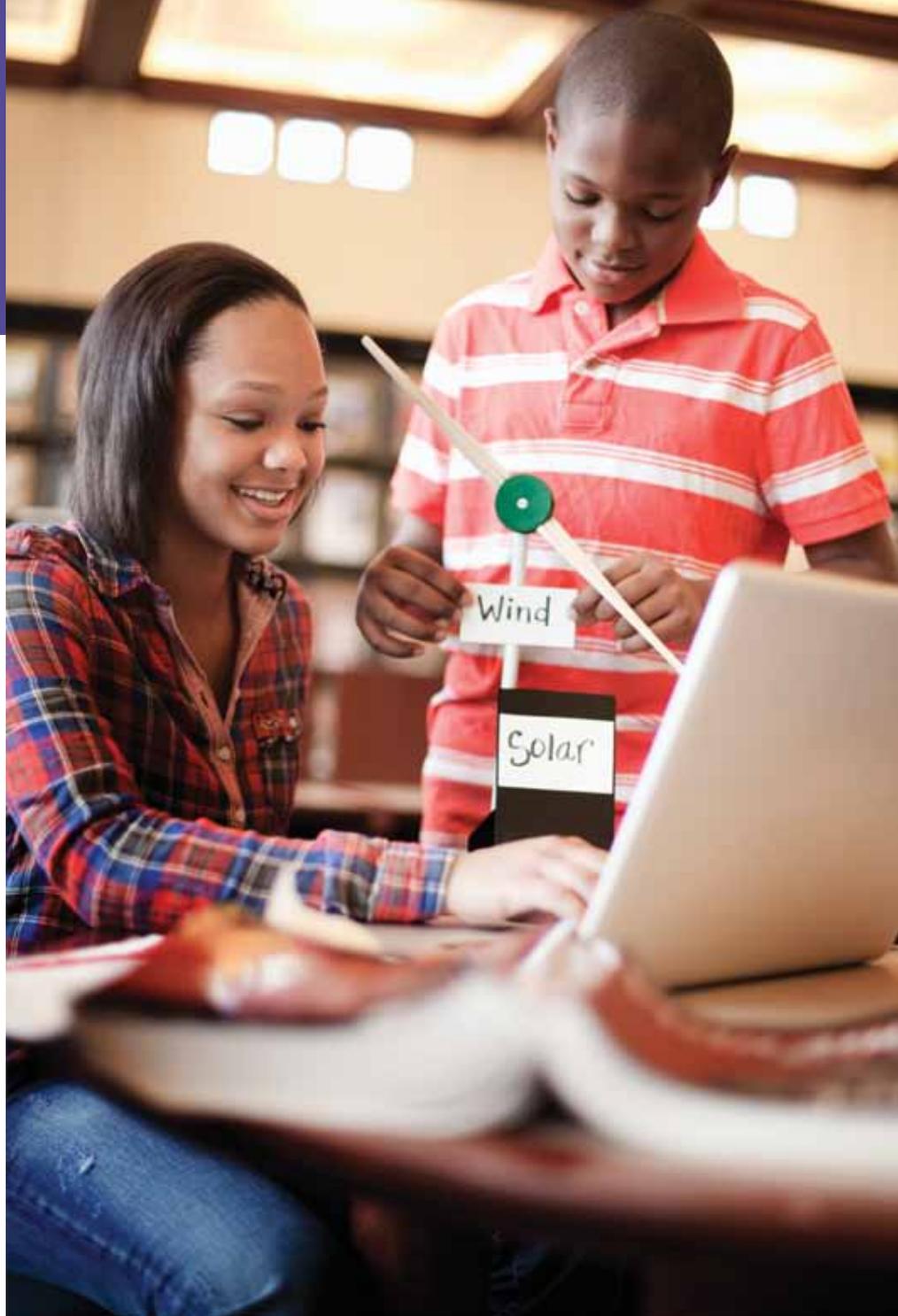
The mission of the freshman advisory program is to help students make the transition from middle to high school and to lay the foundation for success in meeting schoolwide academic, social, and civic expectations. When separating the freshman into advisory groups, great care is taken to balance the senior leader teams so that the freshmen interact with a diverse array of senior leaders. As a result, many of the advisers often say, “My senior leaders run the advisories so well that it is almost as if I do not need to be there!” The current success of the program is reflected in the commitment of faculty members and students.

Advisory groups give students:

- An advocate to help them personalize their educational experience
- An additional structure to ensure that at least one adult knows their aspirations, strengths, weaknesses, and level of progress
- A time to review topics and issues that are relevant to students
- A place to be welcomed
- An opportunity to have questions answered by staff members and peers
- A chance to learn tools and strategies that can help them make the most of their academic, social, and civic opportunities.

The advisers and senior leaders:

- Act as coaches and advocates
- Encourage advisees to participate in the life of Grafton
- Encourage advisees to achieve their academic potential
- Informally review grades of students on a regular basis (advisers only)



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- Help students find answers to their academic and cocurricular questions
- Facilitate discussion of relevant topics
- Help students solve current concerns or issues.

The freshman advisory program occurs once in a seven-day cycle during an advisory block. The freshman advisers include volunteers from among the faculty, the staff,

and the administration. The program runs from August through the end of March and touches upon approximately 16 topics. (See figure 1 for a list of sample topics.) Lessons are given to the faculty advisers in binders each year and to senior leaders through the senior leader group website. Senior leaders are responsible for making copies and getting needed supplies ready for each of the advisory sessions. At the end of each year, all

Figure 1

## Freshman Advisory Lessons and Objectives

Lesson	Objective
Identity Chart	Students will understand what they have in common with their classmates and the importance of each member of the Grafton High School community.
Treasure Hunt	Students will check their understanding of what they know about Grafton High School.
Making the Grade	Students will identify some essential strategies they need to achieve academic success.
Changes	Students will learn to recognize indicators of stress within themselves and identify strategies for coping with change and uncertainty.
Smart Goals	Students will evaluate their academic performance and set future academic and personal goals.
Learning Styles and Study Skills	Students will take a quiz to determine their personal learning styles and will learn study tips so that they can make best use of their study time.
Take a Stand	Students will learn to think about difficult issues by responding to different belief statements that provoke self-examination and reflection and that give participants an opportunity to see different opinions and to defend various positions.
Antibullying	Students will discuss what they currently know about bullying, assess whether it is a problem at Grafton, and learn what they can do about it.
Concentric Circles	Students will discuss school issues as well as aspects of diversity, leadership, and citizenship. Responses are brief and partners keep changing, so at the end of the activity, each participant will have made a personal connection with a number of other people.
Peer Pressure	Students will reflect on peer pressure and share their own experiences. The objective is to open up a discussion between students.
Midterm Prep	Students will share study strategies for successful midterms.
Tough Situations	Students will learn definitions related to prejudice and bigotry. They will also develop and practice strategies and skills for confronting issues of prejudice.

For detailed lessons, go to Senior Leaders under Student Activities on the Grafton High School page at [www.grafton.k12.ma.us](http://www.grafton.k12.ma.us).

The senior leadership program epitomizes the motto because the students learn to take pride as school leaders and to convey the tradition and spirit of Grafton's core values to incoming students.

stakeholders evaluate the program in surveys and discussions. Over the last six years, the lessons have been refined with significant input by advisory teachers, senior leaders, and grade 9 students.

### Senior Leadership Training

The success of the freshman advisory program is due to the extensive training that prepares seniors to lead and facilitate freshman advisory programs and helps senior leaders develop a sense of ownership and leadership skills so that they can better express the core values of the school (i.e., respect, responsibility, integrity, and academic excellence).

During the opening session of senior leader training, the seniors think of questions that they had when they were freshmen and identify what they think the purpose of the freshman advisory program is. Then the seniors are asked to identify Grafton's core values, beliefs, and expectations for learning and to draw connections between those values and their roles as senior leaders. After the opening session, the senior leaders launch into team building and interactive activities. Many of the activities they participate in at the trainings are activities they will be leading in the freshman advisory program.

First, students work individually and in teams to create group identity webs to learn commonalities about one another as well as unique differences. Next, the students participate in a web activity where they sit in a circle and toss yarn to one another as they share one thing they like about Grafton. With each positive comment, they create a web. Many students use this activity

to comment on the wide variety of courses and cocurricular opportunities that Grafton offers, as well as how they like the close-knit community. They learn that the web symbolizes how students and faculty members are all interconnected and that when everyone is working together and holding on to what is positive about Grafton, then the community will be a tight and supportive web. When people start to feel disconnected or focus on negative aspects of the community, then the web falls apart.

The second half of the day is spent participating in activities that promote the school's first core value of respect. Students discuss what respect means to them, who they respect and why, and then they play the "Take a Stand" activity. During this activity, students take a stand and share their beliefs about whether they agree or disagree about various statements, such as:

- I think teachers treat students fairly at Grafton
- I feel like all groups of students are welcomed at Grafton
- It's no big deal to miss an assignment every now and then
- I feel like I am a positive role model for students in the building
- I feel like there is an adult in the building I could talk to if I have a problem.

After this activity, which is the favorite of the senior leaders each year, they discuss how they as senior leaders can help promote respect as well as the social and civic expectations of the school.

On the second day of training, students learn how to set goals, facilitate group discussions, present and

## Grafton High School

GRAFTON, MA

### GRADES:

9–12

### ENROLLMENT:

750

### COMMUNITY:

Suburban

### DEMOGRAPHICS:

87.3 % White, 5.2 % Asian, 3.8 % Hispanic, 1.8 % Black, 0.3 Native American; 12.4 % free and reduced-price lunch eligible

### ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM:

1 principal and 1 assistant principal



communicate effectively, and practice leading some of the freshman advisory lessons. By the end of the two days, students start making references to Grafton's core values and beliefs in discussions, working collaboratively on lesson planning and presentation, and displaying more confidence in their own leadership abilities.

At the conclusion of the training, senior leaders gather around to receive the greatly coveted T-shirt that says, "Grafton High School Senior Leader" on the front and the school motto—"Pride, Tradition, Spirit"—on the back. The senior leadership program epitomizes the motto because the students learn to take pride as school leaders and to convey the tradition and spirit of Grafton's core values to incoming students. At Grafton, building leadership capacity begins with the students. **PL**

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