

Great Relationships

Relationships are the prerequisite for good learning outcomes.

Advisory periods employ strategies that connect students to their learning, such as individual learning plans and student-led conferences.

With a systematic means of building relationships, all students are supported, including those who are at risk of failing or dropping out.

Ask any teacher, administrator, or central office person what they believe that a “student advisory program” is and most frequently they will say that advisories are about relationships. And that is true, but unfortunately for most people, the concept of secondary school advisories stops there. Superintendents, school boards, and others too often view student advisories as a frill that is too expensive to support. At best, this is an uninformed idea of advisories. At worst, it is neglectful of educating the whole child.

As a high school principal who led a comprehensive redesign of my school that included a daily advisory period, I witnessed the transformative power of the relationships that were built in those advisories. Likewise, as a school change coach working with challenged schools in different parts of the country, I have seen how advisories facilitate the development of relationships that lead to higher student achievement.

A Good Investment

Although I am an advocate for student advisories and quality student relationships, I am also a realist. It takes resources and professional and personal will to create “offerings” for students. Many school leaders believe that advisories are not worth the investment. The common view is that advisory is a “soft” offering that does not specifically address high-stakes tests, curricula, and instruction. But when executed properly, advisories address students’ needs so that test scores improve, classroom instruction is supported, parents are engaged in their children’s learning, and students’ “relationships” with their own learning are facilitated (DiMartino, Clarke, & Wolk, 2003). In other words, an advisory system is one of the best investments a school can make to increase learning for all students, especially the most marginal.

The National High School Alliance (2005) supports the creation of advisories and similar relationship-building structures that result in higher student achievement. When linked with student learning plans, portfolios, student-led conferences, project-based learning, and student exhibitions, the advisory becomes the hub of quality relationships that catalyze student learning in a school. Unfortunately, advisories are too often not used to their potential because they are not allocated adequate time and they are isolated from academics.

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When that happens, skeptical adults take it as confirmation that advisories are too labor-intensive to be successful.

Strategies for Success

Advisories raise student achievement when they build connections among people and between students and their courses of study. A well-organized advisory program—one that meets frequently, has a curriculum, and is linked to student learning—will transform the school's culture. The components that follow create the synergy to do just that.

STUDENT LEARNING PLANS

Student learning plans are simply individualized progress plans for students. They can take various forms, but every version includes charting a student's academic and social goals over a specific period of time, such as a month, a quarter, or a semester. Each plan is devised by a student and his or her advisory teacher and is reviewed and approved by the student's parents or guardians.

A student learning plan is a defined pathway that the parties will mutually support and own and helps ensure that the student is not alone in navigating the challenges of school. The plan is routinely revisited during advisory time, where the student and his or her advisory teacher check the student's progress and

determine whether the student needs any additional support. This process encourages and empowers the student and builds the student's sense of self-efficacy.

All students should be able to articulate in fairly good detail what they plan to accomplish and how they plan to do it. The mere act of thinking about what they need to learn and then summarizing how they will learn it, such as by attending study sessions after school and completing assignments in a timely fashion, builds ownership of learning. Moreover, personalized learning plans encourage students to think about their long-range aspirations, such as tentative career goals and postsecondary education.

PORTFOLIOS

Student portfolios are another high-yield anchor for raising student achievement. Once again, the student is the primary architect of this piece. Most educators are familiar with different kinds of portfolios, such as content-specific portfolios in which students



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assemble artifacts representing their progress in a particular discipline. The type of portfolio I am suggesting here is similar, but shows students' overall school achievement.

Students have strong interests, just as adults do. Broad-based portfolios enable students to capture the achievements that they are most proud of. Although most students have attained levels of success and met goals in each of their subjects, it is more likely that students are prouder of the achievements that are in line with their interests. Students can use broad-based portfolios to record evidence of accomplishment toward a particular dream that may not be content specific, such as participating in a marathon or traveling to another state or country. The purpose of these portfolios is to allow students to showcase what they value the most.

STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES

Student plans and portfolios form the foundation of student-led conferences. Students refer back to their goals and examine how their work is aligned to those goals. This process adds to students' sense that their education is relevant and builds their sense of ownership of their learning.

Advisory and content teachers help students decide which artifacts they need to gather and prepare them to "host" their conferences. Students invite their parents or guardians and other significant people to their conferences. Student-led conferences can be proud events for students because they enable them to show off to the people who matter most to them.

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

Project-based learning builds relevance and student ownership while producing high-yield learning by appealing to student's intrinsic interests. Project-based learning also can be adapted to accommodate different learning styles. If students of different learning abilities work on projects together, students who have good learning habits can model those habits for their classmates.

STUDENT EXHIBITIONS

Student exhibitions are simply presentations of longer-term projects to an audience. Such presentations can be the culmination of semester- or yearlong efforts. Although many individual teachers require student exhibitions in their classes, when used schoolwide, student exhibitions change the culture of a school by reinforcing that learning is its primary purpose. Therefore, the using student exhibitions as proof of student achievement is a transformative strategy that involves the entire school community in putting authentic learning first.

Secondary schools are notoriously factionalized into departments, and students end up being pulled in multiple directions at the same time. What teachers often think is systematic in their departments—with each department creating its own system—results in chaos for students as they try to blend the different systems into a comprehensible whole. Using advisories as the anchors for learning exhibitions is a unifying construct for individual students and the learning culture of the school.

Conclusion

When these strategies act together—with advisory periods as a unifying venue—students own their own education, learning is relevant, and achievement accelerates. No one strategy will do all these things. But as a school adopts and supports these strategies, it lessens the likelihood that its students will be at risk of failing, dropping out, and being disenfranchised.

So is the cost of providing time, resources, and personnel for advisories worth it? It will cost a lot more in the way of economic loss and disenfranchised youth if schools fail to build relationships between students and teachers and facilitate students' connections to their curricula. Advisories have the power of raising achievement by embracing all students. The question that schools need to answer is, Do we have the means and the will to build such relationships and connections? For the sake of their students and communities, I hope they do. **PL**

REFERENCES

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