

Promising Practices Series

Center for School Success

Student Advisory



Center for School Success Promising Practices Series

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Student Advisories

Each publication in this series includes a brief overview of research relating to the practice featured, descriptions of one or more schools using the practice, and resources for finding more information. For access to a library of materials that schools have created in relation to the practices, visit our Center for School Success website at www.newvisions.org/schoolsuccess.

To get the most information about these practices, we encourage you to visit the schools. You will find school contact information listed within each publication. We have also developed a Guide to School Visits (see Appendix) to assist you in arranging and planning a school visit.

For more information about New Visions for Public Schools and our programs, please visit our main Web site at www.newvisions.org.

STUDENT ADVISORY

Center for School Success Promising Practices Series

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
WHAT IS STUDENT ADVISORY?	2
WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF STUDENT ADVISORY?	2
HOW IS ADVISORY SCHEDULED?	2
HOW IS ADVISORY ORGANIZED?	3
WHAT IS THE FOCUS OF ADVISORY?	3
WHAT ARE AN ADVISOR'S ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES?	4
WHAT TYPES OF SUPPORT AND PREPARATION DO ADVISORS NEED?	4
HOW DO SOME NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS RUN THEIR ADVISORIES?	4
THE NEW YORK CITY MUSEUM SCHOOL	5
THE BEACON SCHOOL	6
BARUCH COLLEGE CAMPUS HIGH SCHOOL	7
APPENDIX	
SOME HIGH SCHOOLS WITH ADVISORIES THAT YOU CAN CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION	8
REFERENCES	9
RESOURCES	9
GUIDE TO SCHOOL VISITS	11

Center for School Success Promising Practices Series: Student Advisory
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Welcome to the Promising Practices Series! This series will introduce you to some innovative New York City public schools and the instructional practices they use to help students learn and achieve. The series is intended for anyone who is or wants to be involved in improving schools, from administrators and teachers to parents and community partners. Our goal is to support people doing the challenging work of school development, and our message to you is: “You are not alone!”

There are many New York City public school teachers and administrators who have worked hard to develop instructional practices that help their students succeed. We want to provide opportunities for you to learn from them. Our goal is not to offer “models” to replicate. Rather, we want to provide information on the experiences of a wide range of schools in order to stimulate thinking and innovation. Some of the schools featured in this series have existed for less than five years, while others first opened more than 15 years ago. Regardless of their age, they are all works-in-progress, a distinguishing characteristic of effective learning communities. They have all had to face the many demands of an urban educational system -- from changes in policy and funding to staff shortages -- and these are reflected in the how they have modified their practices throughout the years.

This publication focuses on student advisory programs. High school students often feel disconnected and have few personalized relationships with the adults who educate them. Advisory programs are based on the belief that students need the opportunity to develop trusting relationships with adult educators and that doing so benefits students in a variety of ways. In a student advisory program, each student in the school is assigned a teacher or staff member who assists the student in achieving his or her academic and personal goals. Advisory usually includes an advisory class and one-to-one advisement to address personal issues. This publication describes the advisory programs offered in three New York City public high schools.

New Visions for Public Schools is the largest education reform organization dedicated to improving the quality of education children receive in New York City’s public schools. Working with the public and private sectors, New Visions develops programs and policies to energize teaching and learning and raise the level of student achievement. New Visions started the Center for School Success (CSS) in 1999 to document and disseminate innovative educational practices demonstrated by New Visions’ schools that hold promise for increasing student achievement throughout New York City. The success of these schools should serve as examples that New York City public schools, serving the full range of students in New York City, can work.

High school students often feel disconnected and have few personalized relationships with the adults who educate them. Student advisories offer a way to overcome the anonymity many students feel. Advisory programs are based on the belief that students need the opportunity to develop trusting relationships with adult educators, and that doing so benefits students in a variety of ways.

WHAT IS STUDENT ADVISORY?

In a student advisory program, each student in the school is assigned a teacher or staff member who assists the student in achieving his or her academic and personal goals. Advisory usually has two distinct parts: an advisory class, similar to a home room, and one-to-one advisement to address personal issues. While their goals are similar, schools organize and implement their advisory programs in a variety of ways depending on the needs of the school community.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF STUDENT ADVISORY?

Advisory offers emotional support for students during adolescence. The social networks that are so important at this age can be disrupted by the transfer to high school. Advisory offers support in two forms. First, it supplies built-in peer groups for all students in a high school, including new students. Second, it gives students an adult who knows them well and who can offer advocacy and support in difficult social and academic situations. This is especially true for students who have few close adult relationships outside school or are at risk of dropping out. Ideally, the advisory teacher is someone the student knows he or she can trust and talk to about his or her progress and standing in the school.

Advocates of advisory programs see a direct link between a student's emotional and social experience and academic achievement. Advisory promotes self-esteem. It provides peer recognition in an accepting environment, offsetting peer pressure and negative responses from peers in other areas. Students in advisory programs are less likely to drop out and have a lower incidence of substance abuse. The advisor also becomes the primary contact person for parents, increasing their involvement, which has been linked to student achievement at all levels of schooling. By having a more in-depth relationship with teachers, parents are more informed about their child's academic needs and successes and can better support them. Having the advisor as the contact person also increases the overall level of accountability in the school: each teacher is directly responsible for certain students, and each student is directly responsible to a particular teacher.

In order for an advisory to be effective, it must reflect and be a substantial component of the school's mission. An advisory is not just an "add-on" to the curriculum: it requires a substantial investment of time, planning and reflection. Even schools that have maintained their advisories over many years constantly reconfigure them -- often every year -- in order to effectively address the needs of students and the school.

HOW IS ADVISORY SCHEDULED?

While advisory can be scheduled in many different ways, a specific time needs to be dedicated to it for the program to succeed. Many different scheduling strategies can be effective. Advisory schedules typically range from 15 - 30 minutes daily, to

30 - 45 minutes once or twice a week. (A period of less than 15 minutes is too short to have any real effect.) Some schedules alternate, with a group meeting one week and individual advisement the next. Some argue that advisory should be the first period of the day, as it helps students focus and organize for the day ahead. Whatever schedule a school chooses should reflect its goals for its advisory program and its larger vision for students' educational experience.

HOW IS ADVISORY ORGANIZED?

Schools need to consider three main issues when organizing their advisory: class size, staffing, and student assignment. Advisory classes should have no more than 20 students, with 12 to 15 being ideal. Small groups allow for the personalized attention and close relationships between teacher and student that are the key to the program's success. To have such small classes, all school staff need to be involved. This typically includes not only classroom teachers but music and physical education teachers, librarians and administrators. Students can be assigned randomly or deliberately, and neither approach has proven superior to the other. Advisory classes can be organized by grade level or across grades.

In organizing their advisory, many schools assign students to teachers or staff they already work with, so that a base level of familiarity exists. However, teachers will need to balance the role of confidant and advocate with the more authoritative role of classroom teacher. Teachers should have the opportunity to point out any incompatibilities among students assigned to a particular group, such as a history of confrontation between two particular students. Some argue that students should remain in the same group throughout their high school career so that they have a consistent peer group. Others argue that some change is good because different teachers have different strengths as advisors. Whichever method a school chooses, some changes in groups will be necessary to accommodate changing student needs and group dynamics.

WHAT IS THE FOCUS OF ADVISORY?

For some schools, establishing meaningful relationships between students and advisors is the goal of the advisory. However, advisory programs have many different concentrations and purposes:

- Some focus on advocacy. The advisory gives students a chance to discuss academic or behavior problems they may be having, and the advisor advocates on the student's behalf when appropriate.
- Others provide students with a forum in which to discuss issues they face in their day-to-day lives, such as current events, particular issues in the school, or more controversial subjects like drugs or contraceptives. Students are often encouraged to suggest their own topics and to lead discussions. This year, many advisories focused on the events of September 11th, as they raised so many fundamental questions for students.
- Advisories may focus on building community. This approach guarantees that regardless of how their friendships shift, each student has a peer group and a place to discuss social issues.
- Some reinforce academic skills or curriculum areas in a more relaxed environment. The advisory may use material related to other classes students are taking to work on skills like time management, organization, discussion etiquette, listening, and journal writing.
- Others offer specialized curricula, such as service learning or conflict resolution, not covered by the core academic courses.
- Advisory classes are sometimes used to supplement college advisement by teaching interview skills and working on applications and personal statements.

Of course, many schools combine some of the above purposes in crafting their advisory programs. Many use different curricula at different grade levels, so that students' advisory work progresses over time.

WHAT ARE AN ADVISOR'S ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES?

Regardless of what focus a school chooses for its advisory, all advisors have certain core responsibilities. They must run advisory classes and teach the content that faculty and staff have agreed on. They must also meet individually with students and serve as their advocates. With this advocacy role comes a variety of responsibilities:

- Advisors must take an active role in keeping up with each student's status at school by gathering information about academic standing, attendance and behavior from teachers and parents.
- Advisors serve as the primary point of contact with the school for parents of their advisees and need to communicate with parents regularly about their child's academic performance.
- As advocates, advisors need to intervene in situations where a student's pattern of behavior is interfering with academic performance. This may include providing support, developing strategies to address the problem, or seeking out additional services.
- Advisors must document all meetings and communications regarding each student they advise.
- No advisor should be expected to address all of a student's needs. A good advisor, however, can identify those needs and help the student find the supports he or she needs to succeed.

WHAT TYPES OF SUPPORT AND PREPARATION DO ADVISORS NEED?

It is important to recognize that in adopting an advisory program, you are asking teachers to relate to students in a role that many of them may have never played before. The active buy-in of faculty is essential, and that can only be achieved through ongoing collaboration among teachers and a clear definition of expectations and responsibilities.

Most school staff find advisory satisfying and effective. They build closer relationships with students and see the positive impact of the program carry over into the classroom. Often, however, teachers initially feel uneasy about being advisors. Some are concerned about acting as a student's advocate. Others see their role strictly as that of a classroom teacher, and building personal connections with students and their families makes them uncomfortable. Staff development is necessary for all staff but especially for these staff. The school may want to conduct professional development workshops on topics such as building relationships with parents and strategies for gathering information from students. Some teachers may even require specific lesson plans and training in advisement. The principal needs to communicate clear expectations for the advisory program, including how advisory time should be used, topics and formats for discussions, and what administrative duties are required to maintain the advisory group.

HOW DO SOME NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS RUN THEIR ADVISORIES?

While schools may take similar approaches to advisories, each advisory will be tailored to meet the particular needs of a school and its students. On the following pages, we have included descriptions of advisories at three New York City schools that cover a range of approaches. We have also listed a number of schools you may want to contact to discuss their advisory programs.

The New York City Museum School

The Museum School uses its advisory to strengthen a sense of community throughout the school and across grades. The mixed grade advisory program is the one time when students of different age groups interact in the classroom. The school has noted that seniors have a positive influence on the younger students, acting as role models and mentors, and the program works to break down some of the traditional barriers that form between grades.

Structure and Curriculum

Advisory groups meet twice a week for 25 minutes, and each group averages 14 students. Students have the same advisor for all four years and they are assigned randomly. While advisory groups have been relatively informal, the Museum School hopes to make their program more structured in the future in order to help teachers who struggle with their advisory role. Breaking the year into quarters, the school will have advisory groups work on specific projects (such as creating a mural, writing a newspaper, or developing school-wide community building workshops) and will make time for same-sex groups that facilitate the discussion of gender-sensitive topics. At the end of the first semester, advisories will present their projects to the school.

The curriculum is largely based on student-led discussions about relevant issues in their day-to-day lives. Students are encouraged to suggest and lead conversations on academic issues, current events, or personal issues like contraceptives or AIDS/HIV. Features of the advisory classes include:

- Advisors use discussions as a time to help students develop trust and to reinforce listening, discussion, and conflict resolution skills.
- Journal writing activities complement the discussion by allowing students to reflect on their experiences and to formulate and organize their opinions more fully.
- At the end of each week, students participate in a reflective discussion, sharing thoughts and feelings in a mostly free-form manner. At the beginning of the year, advisors use a more structured “closing circle” exercise, where each shares one good thing from the previous week, one bad, and one thing they are looking forward to next week. The exercise reinforces the idea of community and allows students to further practice listening to each other.

Role of the Advisor

Advisors at the Museum School are primarily academic teachers. While they are not given any formal preparation, each receives a framework that includes model lessons for the entire first semester and a list of other staff members they can go to for support.

The advisor’s primary role is that of facilitator. Advisors are not supposed to lead discussions but rather to ask thought-provoking questions and challenge students’ assumptions. Advisors are also expected to act as a student’s advocate, represent-

ing and supporting that student in any academic or behavioral problems he or she might have. The student knows there is at least one teacher who will take his or her side, thus counteracting the “us vs. them” mentality that students may have toward adults in the school.

The Beacon School

The Beacon School’s advisory program is grounded in the belief that the presence of at least one adult in the school who knows a student well will increase that student’s chances for academic success. The advisor keeps track of the student’s overall performance and well-being, and may be able to link patterns in a student’s performance to the student’s home life, thus using a holistic approach to understanding behavior and shows the student that someone cares about him or her personally.

Structure and Curriculum

Advisory classes meet twice a week for 35 minutes, and each group consist of 15 - 20 students in the same grade. The advisor stays with the group through all four years of high school. The Beacon School’s advisory has an educational focus. In addition to developing academic skills, a large amount of time is spent on college preparation and planning for the future. Within this framework, the advisory curriculum varies by grade:

- The ninth grade curriculum is designed to help students with the transition to high school. Students work on organizational and study skills, and they take part in community-building activities. Announcements and other administrative tasks are also covered.
- Tenth grade advisory, otherwise known as “sex, drugs and rock & roll,” focuses on educating students on issues teenagers face. Special guests (for example, Planned Parenthood) are sometimes brought in to lead discussion. During the second semester, college preparation is added to the curriculum; students sign up for the PSAT and take practice tests.
- The first semester of eleventh grade advisory is devoted to college preparation; the second to developing a graduation portfolio. Twelfth grade advisory is similar: students write and revise their college essays, prepare for the SATs and discuss post-graduation plans and expectations.

Role of the Advisor

In order to keep advisory classes small, all teachers, the school directors and numerous administrators serve as advisors. While advisors receive no formal preparation, they do meet once a month in same-grade groups to discuss issues and plan the curriculum.

Advisors are expected to know about any and all academic issues concerning their advisees, and a student’s academic teachers communicate with his or her advisory regularly. In turn, the advisor is responsible for communicating with parents. In addition to meeting with parents twice a year, the advisor regularly posts “anecdotal” (brief descriptions of each student’s progress) online for parents to read.

Baruch College Campus High School

Baruch's advisory serves multiple purposes, all aimed at supporting a school culture of tolerance and respect for the individual. The advisory serves administrative functions, reinforces academic skills, helps students develop social skills and provides them a space to discuss issues they face in their lives. Through its advisory, the school seeks to prevent students from falling through the cracks by ensuring that at least one person knows the student holistically. The school's administration sees the advisory as an invaluable part of the curriculum and places as much importance on it as on any other class.

Structure and Curriculum

Each entering class of approximately 100 students is divided into five advisory groups. Groups stay together and have the same advisor for all four years.

A reading and writing component is a primary focus of Baruch's advisory. Students spend two to three days reading and writing letters about that reading, either to their advisor or to other students. This activity not only improves literacy skills, it helps develop community and facilitates better communication and understanding between the advisor and the student.

Within this framework, the curriculum progresses over the four years of high school:

- Ninth grade advisory meets every day for 25 minutes. In addition to reading and letter writing, classes focus on community-building activities and skills like time management. On Fridays, advisors lead discussions on "hot topics," from plagiarism to events in the news.
- Tenth graders follow a similar schedule, but students lead the discussions. Students write letters to their advisors, who in turn write back, posing analytical questions or encouraging students to relate their reading to other books or personal experience.
- Eleventh graders meet four times a week for 25 minutes. Students are paired up and write letters to each other; the advisor reads copies of the letters and responds. The second semester focuses on college preparation.
- Starting next year, twelfth grade advisory will incorporate the school's Senior Institute Program, which guides students through the college application process and the development of senior exit projects.

Role of the Advisor

All teachers and the principal serve as advisors. Together they are responsible for planning and implementing the curriculum. New teachers are provided with a handbook developed by the staff, which outlines the first few weeks of the advisory and is updated every year. All advisors participate in an annual retreat in August, and the advisory is discussed at weekly staff meetings. Next year, Baruch plans to match experienced advisors with new ones in a mentoring program.

Advisors are parents' primary point of contact with the school. They are expected to communicate with parents if a student is having academic or behavioral problems. Advisors also attend every meeting concerning the student and act as his or her advocate. If the advisor sees signs of any serious personal problems for which the student would need counseling, he or she is expected to contact the school's guidance counselor. The advisor's role is to know students well enough to detect serious problems, but not to counsel students through them.

SOME HIGH SCHOOLS WITH ADVISORIES THAT YOU CAN CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Baruch College Campus High School
17 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY 10010
(212) 802-2620
Principal: Jill Myers
- The Beacon School
227 W. 61st Street
New York, NY 10023
(212) 245-2807
Co-Directors: Stephen Stoll and Ruth Lacey
- Brooklyn International High School
49 Flatbush Avenue Ext.
Brooklyn, NY 11201
(718) 643-9315
Principal: Sara E. Newman
- East Side Community High School
420 E. 12th Street
New York, NY 10009
(212) 460-8467
Principal: Mark Federman
- Fannie Lou Hamer
1021 Jennings Street
Bronx, NY 10460
(718) 861-0521
Principal: Donald Freeman
- Middle College High School @ LaGuardia
45-35 Van Dam Street
Long Island City, NY 11101
(718) 349-4000
Principal: Cecilia Cunningham
- The NYC Museum School
333 W. 17th Street
New York, NY 10011
(212) 675-6206
Co-Directors: Sonnet Takahisa and Ron Chaluisan

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RESOURCES

Internet Resources

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

<http://www.ascd.org/readingroom/books/goldberg98toc.html>

Chicago Public Schools:

<http://www.cps.k12.il.us/AboutCPS/Departments/OHSD/AdvisoryProgram/advisoryprogram.html>

The Coalition of Essential Schools:

http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/8

Connex, Hamble County Board of Education:
<http://www.hcboe.net/main/hcboe/connex/connex.htm>

Education World - The Educator's Best Friend
http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/curr127.shtml

Five Attributes of Satisfying Advisories
<http://www.vla.com/idesign/attributes2.html>

Middle Web - Exploring Middle School Reform
<http://www.middleweb.com/advisory.html>

National Association of Elementary School Principals:
<http://www.naesp.org/comm/mmspg99.htm>

National Middle School Association
www.nmsa.org/

Turning Points - Transforming Middle Schools
<http://www.turningpts.org/>

Print Resources

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