



Teachers as Advisors: Fostering Active Citizens in Schools

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When teachers build relationships with students, the result can be a caring learning community.

When considering democratic education, educators talk about teaching the “whole child,” creating caring classrooms, building communities of learning where every student has access to knowledge, and teaching students how to be active citizens (Goodlad and Keating 1994; Noddings 2002; Apple 1993). These are not practices that are done *to* students but *with* students in ways that promote understanding different points of view and problem solving, resulting in action that is equitable and forward looking. With the pressures to close the achievement gap and improve school performance, how do we find time to embed these practices in the daily activities

of the school community? More importantly, how can we afford not to include students' voices in constructive ways?

Henderson and Milstein (2003) argued that pro-social bonding increases positive connections among youth, their peers, and other adults. These positive connections build resilience skills that are critical to student success. Discussing the importance of relations with others, Noddings (2002) suggested that learning to care for oneself is connected to learning to care for others and that schools can encourage this learning by providing a climate of care and trust.

At Jefferson County Open School, a public alternative school

near Denver, teachers work to reach and build relationships with students to establish resiliency, connectedness, and democratic practices. By knowing students well, these teachers create an environment where students have opportunities for intellectual, emotional, and personal learning. At the Open School, this relationship building happens through the process of advising.

The Role of Advisor

Advising is a strategy that allows teachers at the Jefferson County Open School to create safe and supportive classrooms that help build resilient youth. As one middle school student affirmed, “My trust with the [advising] group and the teacher is pretty high. Why? Because we can talk to each other and we get along. We are a big family, and families protect each other.” Evident from the moment you walk into the school is that students’ strengths and needs are at the forefront of the relationships that the adults and children build together. Every teacher in the building is called an “advisor.” This system of teachers as advisors builds the one-to-one bond between the teacher and advisees of all ages. Even the youngest students refer to their teacher as “my advisor.”

Advising provides a unique and rich opportunity for advisors and students to spend time with one another and discuss challenges and possible solutions. By having these types of discussions—either in large or small groups, or just between advisor and student—students begin to experience and understand how to solve problems and deal with interpersonal relationships. They

also develop skills in communicating effectively, negotiating conflict, and participating in cooperative problem solving. These conversations promote democratic values that foster positive school and classroom climates. In response to a question about the spirit of the school, a high school student stated, “When you walk down the hall, you are greeted; and if you’re having problems, you can get support.”

A Holistic Approach

Jefferson County Open School is in the Jefferson County School District, the largest school district in the state of Colorado. The school is available to students pre-kindergarten through 12th grades from throughout Jefferson County and the surrounding Denver communities. Classrooms have students of mixed ages.

The Open School uses a model that looks like a pie cut into three equal pieces (see Figure 1). Each piece represents a student’s personal, intellectual, and social dimensions. This holistic approach is valued throughout the school, at every age level. The approach allows teachers and staff members to reach and enrich kids in ways not otherwise possible.



Figure 1. The “Pie”

What is most interesting about the pie is that the proportions change every day. Though the model illustrates three equal pieces, the events of the day may demand that one of the pieces takes precedent for an individual, a small group, or the entire school. This reapportionment is controlled by the teachers, who learn to read their students and determine what they need at any given moment. Paying attention to each piece is what gives these teachers a unique perspective about their students—a caring and empathetic view that allows every teacher also to be an advisor, mentor, and advocate.

Elementary Level

Advising at the Open School basically has three dimensions: one-on-one, whole group, and selected group. At the primary level, teachers are the advisors for their group of students, usually a 20–25 to 1 ratio. Students stay with the same teacher/advisor until they move to the next level. Therefore, one student may have the same advisor for three to four years. At the youngest level, most advising is accomplished as a whole group.

Whole group advising is a part of the daily schedule, usually at the beginning and end of each day. Topics range from getting along on the playground and bullying to the death of a student and world events. At the intermediate level (grades 3–6), meetings are often led by a student with the support of the teacher/advisor. Ground rules for meetings are reviewed continuously, and students often monitor other students’ behavior.

Sometimes group advising happens in response to a situation that arises within the classroom.

Recently, in an upper elementary classroom, some students became upset while working in cooperative groups. The advisor stopped the activity and sat with all the students in a circle on the floor. The group meeting revealed that several students' feelings had been hurt by classmates. Issues of "hate language" were occurring in the classroom and on the playground. The teachers who were co-teaching in this classroom took the opportunity to do some group advising, framing dialogue that addressed categories of hateful language and its meanings.

In a note to all parents, one teacher expressed the importance of paying attention to these social and personal issues:

Most of us weren't born with the ability to empathize or resolve conflicts; we have to learn these skills. Just as with reading and writing, we are all at various places on a developmental continuum of interpersonal skills. Our classroom is a microcosm of the great big world that adults deal with every day. I appreciate the opportunity to offer kids the chance to learn and practice these skills in a safe and supportive environment.

The same teacher went on to ask parents to help their children take responsibility for their actions and to help them know that they can do the difficult work necessary to create a safe and respectful community. This is an example of the way advising can come from and extend beyond the classroom walls. The teachers recognized a student behavior, identified a situation, and took action to address it and

its impact on relationships in a broader sense. By addressing the issues head on, caring for others becomes a focus of learning. The democratic principal of balancing individual needs as well as the needs of the whole community is exemplified.

Like group advising, one-on-one advising can happen any time, any place, as issues arise. During

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these personal meetings, a student and advisor discuss problems the student may be having with others, particular behavioral issues, or problems at home. Selected group advising occurs less frequently than group or one-on-one advising. This approach is useful for times when a small group, sometimes of just girls or boys, needs special attention.

An elementary teacher explained advising this way:

As an advisor, you grow with the students while focusing on the social, personal, and intellectual development of every child. Everyone works together to build trust and communication while shar-

ing knowledge and growing to understand individual fears and differences. An advisor's success is based on the overall well-being of all students in the classroom, not on a school's test scores.

During group advising sessions, attention to the well-being of all is evident. In one classroom, students share space on the carpeted floor and discuss with the teacher how their reading journals and reading strategies are working and how to use these tools more effectively. Students and advisors contribute, and students see their ideas reflected later in the practices of the classroom.

Secondary Level

Building on advisees' interests and what they already know works to ensure lifelong learning on the part of the students. By concentrating on all three aspects of "the pie," students are encouraged to create goals to promote growth in all areas and are encouraged to take ownership of their learning.

A concrete example of this occurs in the middle school. Advisors and students together work on creating a portfolio that captures the process of individual growth. Each middle school advisor uses the same format—a notebook with sections for students to set goals, keep those goals on track, and follow the growth process. The portfolio encourages connections to the personal, intellectual, and social goals of learning. Individual students work with advisors on a day-to-day basis to talk and reformulate progress—promoting for students at the Open School a meaningful ownership in learning.

At the secondary level, each middle and high school teacher is assigned between 18–20 students. These students remain their advisees until they move to the next level (middle school to high school) or graduate. Therefore, students at the secondary level have the same teacher/advisor for 2–4 years. Many advising groups share activities, such as service learning projects or trips.

Whole group advising meetings take place at least twice a week at the secondary level. This is the time when advisors can discuss current issues or concerns with students or plan upcoming activities. Again, these meetings may be student-led, with the group developing its own ground rules. Also, advisors regularly schedule individual meetings with advisees to review their class schedules, make sure they are on target to meet portfolio goals, complete independent projects, or provide guidance with personal issues.

As at the elementary level, selected group meetings are not as common and take place as needed. In the high school, there are also “triads” or small groups of students that advise one another without an adult present. These small groups often help each other on independent projects or other school work as needed.

Advising at the secondary level gives students a place to connect. The advisor is responsible for creating the schedule and individual learning plans with students. School communications are delivered through advising. Groups often eat lunch together, participate in team-building activities, or discuss issues related to current events. Students have ownership in the decisions that are made. For ex-

ample, most advising groups have created “norms” for getting along in the classroom: “Take responsibility for your learning; respect other people’s choices, ideas, and opinions; be a good example for others.” These norms are revisited and taken seriously.

In a recent middle school advising class, the advisor explained

“Voice is an important factor in building trust and confidence in young democratic citizens.”

that one student had incurred a “trust violation”—one classmate had told him on his mid-block review that everything was going great when actually he had been skipping one of his classes. Students talked in small groups about the qualities needed to be a successful Open School student. The advisor gathered student opinions and then gave his. An open discussion ensued about freedom and responsibility, finding ways to express need for help or dissatisfaction, and what it means to be at a school where student voice is valued in language and in action.

One high school teacher reflected on advising this way:

When I graduate a student from my advisory group, I am the person who is certifying that student as being, in effect, an adult. That is a responsibility which the school entrusts to me and not to the organization. Education is not limited to or encompassed by schooling, training, or skills building. It is the lifelong process by which one becomes a human being.

Advisors acknowledge the voice of students in the classroom. Voice is an important factor in building trust and confidence in young democratic citizens. Through this experience, students learn how to discuss problems and concerns in an appropriate manner. Everyone’s opinions, feelings, and concerns are taken into consideration before a decision is made. This process whereby students draw their own conclusions, make their own decisions, and determine their own actions provides advisors and students a sense of fulfillment.

One advisor summed up the experience this way:

I am a plate spinner. The plates are our students, and they can be fragile. When you get them perfectly balanced and moving in the correct fashion, they usually keep going on their own pretty well, although it can be difficult at times to deal with the demands of so many students working on individual projects on individual schedules. My job is to get all of my plates spinning on sticks and keep them going until they don't need any work from me to keep them spinning. At that point, they are usu-

ally ready to graduate and move on.

Final Thoughts

Teachers say that advising is the feature that makes teaching exciting at the Open School. Through advising, the Open School is a school about relationships. And through these relationships, students are encouraged to do the kinds of learning that are meaningful to them and their community. It's the personal things, the self-directed aspects, that take kids to a new level, helping them find out who they are, what they want to be, and how they will contribute to create the world that ought to be.

This is a world where students become caring, empathetic adults, where learning is a lifelong journey, and citizens are able to work together, to lead one another, and to solve challenges cooperatively. However, as Benard (2004) pointed out, it is how adults do what they do that counts. The starting point for building on students' capacities is the belief by all adults in their lives, particularly in their school, that every youth has innate abilities. That transformational power exists not in programmatic approaches per se, but at the deeper level of relationships, beliefs and expectations, and the willingness to share power.

References

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Suggestions for Effective Advising

A focus group of Open School teachers listed the following considerations about advising at all levels:

- Decrease the student-teacher ratio any way you can. Small advising groups are important.
- Learn about families, their struggles, challenges, attitudes, and passions; doing so helps you to know more about from where students come.
- Advocate for each student and teach students how to advocate for themselves.
- Make each student feel important by valuing his or her uniqueness.
- Encourage students to ask for help.
- Help each student set goals.
- Allow individuals to take responsibility for their own learning.
- Develop support groups for kids who have experienced divorce, death, or trauma.
- Encourage self expression, self-reflection, and self-evaluation.
- Develop an advisory system that can focus on each individual student's personal needs, and then encourage personal relationships with those advisors.
- Honor students when they constructively disagree by promoting/ modeling dialogue and being open to change.
- Demonstrate the "power of one" by providing examples of individuals that have made a difference, and empower individuals to do the same in your classes through their own actions.
- Provide a way to uncover a passion.
- Expect self-direction and encourage it.
- Celebrate strengths; don't dwell on weaknesses.
- Focus on the individual to take responsibility for his or her actions.
- Model personal strengths and struggles.

Sources for Advising and Building Caring Relationships in Schools

National Association of Elementary School Principals

www.naesp.org

Search Institute

40 Developmental Assets for Youth

www.search-institute.org

National Dropout Prevention Centers

www.dropoutprevention.org

Southern Poverty Law Center

Teaching Tolerance

www.splcenter.org

The Character Education Partnership

www.character.org

Oxfam Global Education

www.oxfam.org.uk