Why Create Advisory Programs?

Advisory programs have existed in independent schools and a few public schools for decades. The Coalition of Essential Schools played a significant role in the expansion of advisories. One of the Coalition's ten Common Principles states "teaching and learning should be personalized to the maximum feasible extent." Starting in 1984, many Coalition schools chose advisories as one vehicle for achieving personalization.

In 1989, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development published *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century. Turning Points,* a call for transforming the education of early adolescents, accelerated the middle school movement. The first of its eight essential principles promotes dividing large middle grade schools into smaller communities. Assigning an adult advisor to each student was seen as a key strategy for achieving smaller communities. *Turning Points* said, "Every student should be well known by at least one adult. Students should be able to rely on that adult to help learn from their experiences, comprehend physical changes and changing relations with family and peers, act on their behalf to marshal every school and community resource needed for the student to succeed, and help to fashion a promising vision for the future." (p. 40)

Turning Points 2000 goes further, stating "Among youth at risk from health or behavioral problems, family dysfunction, poverty, or other stresses, the most important school factor fostering resilience — defined as 'successful adaptation despite risk and adversity'…— may be the availability of at least one caring responsible adult who functions as a mentor or role model…"

High schools have generally lagged behind middle schools in seeing the importance of personalization and utilizing advisory programs. In 1995, the National Association of Secondary School Principals published *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution. Breaking Ranks* challenges high schools of the 21st century to be "much more student-centered and above all much more personalized in programs, support services, and intellectual rigor" (p. vi). In its section, "School Environment: Creating a Climate Conducive to Teaching and Learning," it recommends, "Every high school student will have a personal Adult Advocate to help him or her personalize the educational experience." The report says "The relationship between the student and advocate should ensure that no youngster experiences the sense of isolation that frequently engulfs teenagers during this critical period of their lives" (p.31).

More recently, the Gates and Carnegie Foundations and the federal government have supported the development of small learning communities in high schools. Advisory programs are seen as one of the key building blocks for creating a small learning community, whether it's in a brand new small school or a traditional high school that is being restructured into smaller units.

Another development supports the creation of advisory programs. There's a growing body of research from the study of resiliency and the field of prevention showing an integral link between school success and healthy development. This is especially true for students who find it more challenging to navigate the dominant culture of secondary school successfully. In a nutshell, the research says that if we create safe, supportive, respectful learning environments, personalize young people's learning experience, help them develop social and emotional competencies, and provide opportunities to practice these skills, they will grow more attached to school, avoid risky behavior, and achieve more academic success. Effective advisory programs meet all of these goals.

The research reveals an interesting and complex set of cause and effect relationships. To begin with, initiatives that make the learning environment safer, more caring, better managed, and more participatory have been shown to increase student attachment to school. In turn, students who are more connected and attached to school are more successful as measured by indicators like better attendance and higher graduation rates, as well as higher grades and better standardized test scores.

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a survey of 75,000 students from 127 schools, found that school connectedness is maximized when the school environment meets

core adolescent developmental needs. These needs include opportunities for autonomy, opportunities to demonstrate competence, caring and support from adults, developmentally appropriate supervision, and acceptance by peers. In other words, meeting basic developmental needs is the foundation for academic and school success. This makes good common sense. Students need to first feel safe (both physically and psychologically), feel like they belong, feel respected, and feel cared about in order to be successful in school.

Positive personal relationships with teachers and bonding with peers are keys to students' success. Academic personalization emphasizes differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, multiple intelligences, and the social construction of knowledge. In addition, student work that has personal meaning and value, and strengthens metacognition and problem solving skills, makes learning both relevant and rigorous. One study showed that when students perceive their teachers as caring and respectful, they participate more in class, complete more of their homework, and cheat less often.

Research also indicates that interventions that improve the climate for learning, enhance student attachment to school, and increase student achievement decrease the rates of high risk behaviors. The Adolescent Health survey found that adolescents' sense of connectedness to school is the single most important factor associated with significantly lower rates of emotional distress, suicidal thoughts and behaviors, violence, substance abuse and sexual activity. In other words, when students connect positively with peers and adults, they are more likely to avoid high risk behaviors. A meta-analysis of 165 prevention programs found that initiatives that created a more positive environment decreased the prevalence of delinquency, alcohol and drug use, drop-out and non-attendance rates, and behavior problems.

Despite these many findings, school reform efforts and prevention programs evolve separately in most schools. The assumption that students' thinking, feelings, and behavior function independently of each other continues to drive the organizational culture of most secondary schools, especially high schools, where the myth of the divided self goes unchallenged. Relentless departmentalization sanctions specialized roles of adults in secondary schools — the content expert in the classroom, the child expert in the guidance center, and the discipline expert in the dean's office. One group is entrusted to take care of young people's physical, social, and emotional needs, while the other group serves as students' intellectual guardians. If we fail to appreciate how students' academic success is linked intricately to their healthy development, we are unlikely to change the outcomes of the students we want to help the most. Improving the quality of relationships among and between adults and young people can stand at the center of an integrated approach to successful prevention and instructional reform.

Advisory programs promote healthy student development, support academic success, and provide multiple opportunities to bridge the divide between healthy development and academic success. They help ensure that all young people have an adult who knows them well. Advisory helps create stronger bonds among young people, usually cutting across the typical exclusionary social groups that form in schools. It is the "safe container" for discussing adolescent concerns and provides an ideal setting to teach and practice important life skills. Advisories encourage student voice on school-wide issues. Finally, they establish a forum for academic, college and career coaching, and advisement that cuts across subject areas. In short, advisory programs encourage both student achievement and healthy development directly through instruction, coaching, and monitoring; and indirectly through increasing attachment to school.