ADVISORY PROGRAMS

A LITERATURE REVIEW

A Paper

Presented to

Dr. David Kommer

Ashland University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Education

Adrean Ray
July 20, 2004
Although housed in the same building, the middle school I work in today and have for the past ten years, is a very different place from the junior high I attended twenty years ago. This is largely due to the middle school reform movement. The largest change I see involves teaming. Where once, I was just one in a sea of seventh and eighth graders, now students are part of smaller learning communities within their grade and share common teachers for their core subjects. Among other things, peer mediation, monthly newsletters, student-led conferences, 6th grade visitation, and interdisciplinary units, although commonplace today did not occur during my “junior high” days.

My middle school is not unlike most others. We all have statements of purpose, or mission statements that call attention to addressing all aspects of students’ development—intellectual, physical, social, and emotional. But like many others, we are also guilty of James’s claim (1986), the statements that deal with students’ social and emotional development are not backed up with specific programs or plans for achieving growth in those areas. They are rather left to chance.

“This We Believe,” a position paper developed by the National Middle School Association, asserts that middle schools that are developmentally responsive are characterized by, among other things, “an adult advocate for every student” (National Middle School Association, 1995, p.16).

While the junior high school I attended so long ago has made great strides towards becoming a “middle school,” we do not have a purposefully planned program to meet the diverse affective needs of students and there is no program that will guarantee that each child is known well by at least one adult in the building. It is for these reasons I feel it is time for my middle school to take the next step: Advisory.
Advisory Defined

What is advisory? The National Middle School Association defines an advisory program as:

an arrangement whereby one adult and a small group of students have an opportunity to interact on a scheduled basis in order to provide a caring environment for academic guidance and support, every day administrative details, recognition, and activities to promote citizenship (National Middle School Association, 1996, para. 1).

This small group of students “identifies with and belongs to one educator who nurtures, advocates for, and shepherds through school the individuals in that group” (Cole, 1992, p. 5). Forte and Schurr (1993) add that advisory is an affective educational program that focuses on the social, emotional, physical, intellectual, psychological, and ethical development of students.

According to Van Hoose (1991), the fourth R – Relationships are the essence of advisories. Through the advisory program, teachers and students have a time and place to get to know one another as a group and to develop caring attitudes (Conners, 1990).

The key purpose of an advisory program is that every student should be known well by at least one adult in the building (Ayers, 1994). Through ongoing regular contact consisting of both one-on-one and group experiences, individual relationships between student and advisors are formed (Gatta & McCabe, 1997).

By developing a relationship characterized by caring, trust and honesty, middle school teacher/advisors help students feel secure within the school environment, speak to their questions, fears, and concerns, and prepare students to succeed while building adolescents’ self-esteem (Whitney & Hoffman, 1998, p. 232).
Another core goal of advisory programs as described by Stevenson in Teaching Ten to Fourteen Year Olds (2002) is providing academic guidance and support. Teacher advisors continually monitor their kids’ performance in their schoolwork by both group discussion and private discussion, examining work samples, helping clarify confusions or uncertainties, mediating with other teachers on behalf of an advisee who is having difficulties arranging tutoring or peer instruction as needed and so on (p. 318).

A third concept, key to advisory programs, is that advisors serve as the “primary contact between school and parents” (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). The advisor can be parents’ prime point of contact when seeking information on their students or school programs. Cole (1992) proclaims that an advisor who has fifteen or so students in his/her group which meets regularly will have a pretty good picture of how each individual in that group is faring in school. Even if the advisors are not able to give the parent an up-to-date progress report on the spot, they may request that the entire teaching team, perhaps including the counselor or administrator, meet with the parent to adequately respond to the request. Or advisors might direct parents to a more appropriate source, such as an individual teacher or counselor with specialized knowledge to answer the question. Further, according to the National Middle School Association (1996), advisory programs can provide a vehicle to link parents with adolescents. Wigfield and Eccles (1995) noted that “continual parental involvement in education is crucial to early adolescents’ success in school” (p. 7).

The literature also describes several secondary components of advisory programs. Some of the time spent in advisory groups focuses on group activities that teach cooperation, critical thinking and problem solving skills (Stewart, 1993). To help teach students empathy and altruism, Ayers (1994) recommends the involvement of students in community service projects.
Advisory groups can also provide a positive peer group for students fulfilling a primary social need of young adolescents to feel a sense of belonging (Stevenson, 2002). Cole (1992) describes this need for groupness as the “herd instinct” (p.5) and understanding and meeting this developmental need is essential for working effectively with middle school students.

Galassi, Gulledge & Cox (1997a) revealed advisory programs can be designed to meet several different types of needs, mostly those of students, but also of teachers and administrators. Student needs may be classified as affective, cognitive or a combination of both. Affectively, advisory programs aim to increase feelings of caring students perceive from adults in the school or to increase students’ sense of community. Program attempts to meet students’ needs for more effective study skills, reading skills or other forms of academic enhancement fall into the cognitive realm. Programs that combine the two frequently teach life skills such as stress or time management and decision making skills. Because teachers also seek rewarding relationships with students and want to feel they are making a difference, advisory programs can effectively address teachers’ need to be nurturing. Administrative “housekeeping” needs such as distributing school materials, communicating school or team information, collecting money and so on can also be met through advisory (Galassi, Gulledge & Cox, 1997b).

Need for Advisory Programs

Why should middle schools incorporate planned programs, such as advisory, to address students’ affective development and provide a caring adult advocate for each student?

Young people undergo more rapid change and profound personal changes during the years between ten and fifteen than any other period in their lives. Although growth in infancy is also very extensive, infants are not the conscious witnesses of their development, as are young adolescents. These developmental processes, while natural
and necessary, often constitute challenges for youngsters as well as for the teachers, parents, and others entrusted with responsibility for their healthy development and education (National Middle School Association, 1995, p. 6).

Mac Iver (1990) asserts that “As young adolescents strive for autonomy, as they grapple with learning how to regulate their own behavior and make responsible choices, their need for close adult supervision and guidance is paramount” (p. 458). Strong advisory groups can provide this.

According to Gallassi & Gulledge (1997), transescence is characterized by a pulling away from parental and family support, or at least a reaching out to find connections to the world in ways other than those experienced in one’s childhood. Adolescents are thus more vulnerable to negative influences, even if they were not particularly at risk at a younger age. If middle schools can create positive relationships among students and between student and teachers, they can nurture psychological and physical health; academic, social and emotional, development; and positive attitudes and values, which will favorably influence all other initiatives of the school. The desired outcome of positive relationships and connections is healthy students who “learn how to work with and be committed to others” (Johnson & Johnson, 1995, p. 11).

Knowledge of this critical period in the human life cycle makes it clear that young adolescents are deeply concerned about and very much occupied with their physical, psychological and social development. Like it or not, it is a reality that school programs designed for ten to fourteen year olds must address and accommodate (Hoversten, Doda & Lounsbury, 1991). Classroom concern for affective factors cannot be put aside to concentrate on academic achievement because according to James (National Middle School Association, 1986, “. . . no learning situation or teaching process is without its inseparable affective attributes” (p.2).
James echoes the words of A. Mikalachki, who concluded in 1973 that: cognitive learning cannot take place in a state of affective disorder, and we can no longer assume that the family or some other agency will take responsibility for the students’ (total) affective development. It is imperative that school systems devote both their wits and financial resources to the production of programs of affective learning (p. 19).

As Rubinstein (1994) asserts in Hints of Teaching Success in Middle Schools, “The most critical need for any person is to find meaning, purpose and significance. In order to do this, that person must feel understood, accepted and affirmed” (p.26). The National Middle School Association (1995) believes that the nature of the educational programs adolescents experience during this formative period of like will largely determine the future for all of us. If this is true, then advocacy for young adolescents becomes an essential element for any developmentally responsive middle school (Burkhardt, 1999).


Implementation

Planning

While there is no magic formula for the amount of effort and length of time required to plan and implement a program, James (1986) recommends in Advisor-Advisee Programs: Why, What and How, at least one full academic year for planning and training before implementing an advisory program. In this time, all parties involved in the decision-making processes should have enough time to assess program development needs, outline goals and objectives, locate resources, establish priorities and responsibilities for implementation, and educate and train all persons who will be involved in the program. This time will also all for the initial development
of appropriate program evaluation devices. Ziegler and Mulhall (1994), on the other hand, recommend a planning period of at least six months and inservice programs for staff dealing with team building and adolescent development.

**Size**

With regards to the optimal size of an advisory group, the experts agree that smaller is better. Erb and Doda (1989), report that the typical ratio for advisory groups is one teacher for every fifteen to twenty-five students. Ayers (1994) and Stevenson (2002), recommend groups not exceed twenty. Ziegler and Mulhall (1994) and Burns (nd), agree that fifteen or fewer students is a good number, while Burkhardt (1999) asserts that ten to twelve students is ideal. Burns further states though, that many excellent advisor activities actually run better with a larger group, eg. certain service projects, class meetings, games or interactive activities.

**Who Will Serve as Advisors?**

James (1986) and Hoversten et al. (1993), recommend that in order to achieve a relatively small number, schools must use virtually all certified personnel as advisors. This way students and adults can interact in cooperative small group structures and develop more personal intergroup relations. However, by requiring people to be advisors who, for whatever reason, cannot or will not work effectively with students outside an academic context, can cause unnecessary stress on certain learners and teachers, and could possibly undermine a program’s goals. James (1986) advises giving reluctant faculty another, less personal, aspect of the total program such as sponsoring a club or running an intramural activity. This can give them time to assess the program and their possible future role.

**Frequency and Length of Meetings**
The frequency and length of meetings recommended varies greatly. Many, including Bergman (1997) and Ziegler and Mulhall (1994) prefer daily meetings. Teacher Advisory Tips for Success (nd) recommends two to three times a week as opposed to every day. Brown and Shetlar (1994) are in favor of meeting at least three times a week.

Recommended meeting times average around 20-30 minutes, but as Burns (nd) stated, the time the advisory group meets will depend on the activity taking place. Flexibility in scheduling is needed for this to work effectively. Epstein & Mac Iver (1990) reported, when schools have one period, they usually schedule it daily for 20-25 minutes, on an average. When two period are scheduled, the second one is often added once or twice a week, and the average combined length of time scheduled daily for advisory and homeroom activities is between 30 – 35 minutes (p. 18).

James (1986) advises schools follow as a minimal rule of thumb, a length of time equal to twice the number of people in the advisory group. Wormeli (1999), on the other hand, suggests full day advisory experiences over short daily or weekly meetings. In his opinion, the goals of good advisory programs cannot always be accomplished in fifteen to twenty minute sessions. Therefore, some schools such as his, have added three to six full day experiences throughout the year. “Essential components of a successful full day advisory include fun; community service; food; physical movement or exertion; time for reflection/processing/interaction; and the freedom to be accepted for who you are” (p.40).

Grouping of Students

James (1986) recommends that groups be balanced with an equal number of males and females and mixed according to different ethnic and racial groups whenever possible. Hoversten, et al (1993), add that groups can be composed of one grade level or they may be
multi-graded. Students can be randomly placed in groups by the administration; or the students themselves may have a role in choosing their groups; or groups may be constituted by their first period class assignment; or the team of teachers may divide their students into groups. Teachers may retain their advisory group for their entire stay at the school or have a new group of advisees each year. With options abounding, each school will have to discuss and determine, in the planning stage, which option for grouping will best fit the needs of their particular students and teachers.

*Best Time of the Day to Meet*

According to James (1986) some schools, borrowing from the “homeroom” traditions, feel that the advisory program should take place first thing in the school day. This would give students something special to experience as a start-up for a great school day. Others, borrowing from the summary practices at the elementary level, believe the program should conclude the scheduled day. This can help insure that every child goes home feeling good about themselves, others, and school. Finally, another option occurs in schools where extra time is created due to a staggered lunch period. If students have 30 minutes for lunch, the remaining hour can be used for various advisory activities.

**Effectiveness**

According to Burkhardt (1999), schools that have instituted and maintained successful advisory programs note increased academic achievement, less vandalism, greater attendance, fewer alienated students, more student centered learning, and a better climate permeating the building.

Mac Iver and Epstein (1993), noted that “principals in schools with well implemented group advisory programs report that they have stronger guidance programs overall and lower
expected drop-out rates” (p. 526). Mac Iver (1990) suggests that advisory groups give students extensive social support and frequent opportunities to discuss topics that are meaningful to them. The adult/student and student/student relationships formed are essential to young adolescents’ success.

Putbrese (1989) surveyed 3,400 middle-level students to assess the effects of advisory programs and found a reduction in student smoking and alcohol use. Ziegler and Mulhall (1994) reported increases in decision making, the sense of belonging to the school, and in teacher-student relationships in their three-year study of a Canadian advisory program.

Simmons and Klarich (1989), provided this narrative account attesting to the effectiveness of advisory programs:

Students who have learned to cooperate with and care about others help create a pleasant school atmosphere in which everyone feels a sense of security and belonging . . . The results are increased concern, trust, and better communication among the entire school community (p.13).

While these findings provide some understanding of the effectiveness of advisory programs, more research is needed to report the benefits to students (George & Alexander, 1993).

**Pitfalls and Hazards**

“Regardless of everything that can be done to establish and maintain an effective advisory program, it will fail unless those people who will serve as advisors commit themselves to the program” (Stevenson, 2002, p. 320). Why are teachers not committed to advisories? According to Ayers (1994), “inadequate preparation. Fear, inexperience, lack of appropriate skills, and above all, ignorance of underlying philosophy” (p.10), can all contribute to teacher
discomfort and rejection of advisories. Forte & Schurr (1993) add that some teachers may feel uncomfortable with the role of advisor because of their reluctance to share their personal experiences and affective selves with students. Others may be reluctant to take time away from academic disciplines in order to teach affective content and skills. Incomplete curriculum of advisory topics, activities and active learning strategies can also hinder teachers’ commitment to a program. Esposito and Curcio (2002) recommend extensive planning and staff development before implementing a program and a frequent supply of guidance materials as ways to prevent these kinds of reactions.

Burns (nd), believes that satisfying advisory programs come from a shared sense of need and a common understanding of what program will accomplish. “Most failed advisory programs were developed not on a shared sense of need, but to complete a checklist of necessary components to have a ‘true’ middle school” (Burns, para. 39). He claims that a shared vision for advocacy, clearly identifying its aim and purposes, developed with the input of all key players, can ensure the program will succeed.

Stevenson (2002) cites the inadequate apportionment of time as a second common hazard to successful advisories. He emphasizes the importance of a daily advisory period no less than twenty minutes with at least one additional weekly meeting of 30-35 minutes to effectively accomplish advisory goals.

Keys to Success

Forte & Schurr (1993) gathered from the literature the following eighteen key elements of a successful advisory program. Although some of them may be mentioned in earlier parts of this review, it is important to emphasize them here again.

- Each advisor plays the role of a child advocate representing that student at
team meetings, screening meetings, parent conferences, and other student/staff sessions.

- Each advisor initiates intervention procedures and referrals both within the advisory setting and if necessary, in collaboration with counseling services.
- Each advisor maintains a line of communication with the advisee’s academic teachers and with the advisee’s parents or guardians.
- Each advisor engages in individual conferences with advisees on a predetermined and consistent basis.
- Each advisor maintains accurate records on advisees, including such tools as an advisee information folder, advisee academic plan card, advisee attendance/behavior record, advisee report card and progress report, and advisee test scores, to name a few.
- Each advisor supports the advisory concept and works to improve his/her performance in the advisory role and setting.
- Each advisor is well informed on the unique needs and characteristics of the early adolescent and of the advisees assigned in his/her advisory class.
- Each advisor becomes the single most important adult in the school for his/her advisees.
- Each advisory class has a reasonable teacher-pupil ratio.
- Each advisory class has a specific time and place to meet that is regularly scheduled.
- Each advisory class meets a minimum of three times a week for an average of 20 to 30 minutes a, or meets on an alternative predetermined plan.
• Each advisory class provides advisees with activities that are varied, active, and student centered.

• Each advisory class has a common core curriculum with flexibility in its implementation.

• Each advisory class represents a place where both advisors and advisees look forward to advisory time and tasks.

• Each advisory class places a high emphasis on individual learning styles.

• Each advisory class maintains a balance of individual, small group, and large group activities.

• Each advisory class infuses higher order creative and critical thinking skills whenever able to do so.

• Each advisory class emphasizes and advisee’s academic, social, emotional, physical, psychological, or self-concept in its program (p.260).

Conclusion

Middle-level students experience many physical, social, emotional, and intellectual changes. At this critical developmental point in their lives, understanding and acceptance from supportive adults, friends, and classmates go hand in hand with success. Advisory groups can provided a structure to address the academic, social, and emotional needs of young adolescents in the middle school.

Students need a comprehensive, school-oriented program for the purposes of academic, social, and emotional development, communication and educational guidance. Advisory can provide this. Students need at least one staff member who has a thorough knowledge of the
student’s strengths, weaknesses, interests, needs and personal growth. An advisor can be that person. Each child needs to have an adult advocate in the school, a person who can champion the student’s cause in student to student, student to teacher and student to administrator interactions. Advisers can accomplish this. Advisory programs can also aid students’ need to develop a positive self-concept and effective ways of interacting with other students and adults. An advisory program can also assist students as they negotiate the social and academic aspects of school. Parents need to know whom to contact for regular communication about the progress their child is making. An advisor can be that contact.

With all the benefits advisory programs can provide, I pose this simple question: What are we waiting for?
Reference List


Adrean Ray teaches eighth graders the joys of American history at Ashland Middle School in Ashland, Ohio.