

## **Voices from the field: Preparing pre-service teachers for that crucial advisor role**

### **Dr. John Niska**

Mary Lou, Seventh Grade ELA Teacher

“Connecting with our middle school students is so important, and a well-run advisory period can help with this connection. When serving as a cooperating teacher, I really enjoy co-facilitating my advisory group and can learn new ideas from my student teacher. I also want to be part of the group so that, when the student teaching experience is completed, I still have a connection with my advisees.”

Debbie, Seventh Grade Mathematics Teacher

“Advisory programs have different focuses and each must determine the responsibilities of their advisors in their role. Each school needs to determine this focus and devise activities related to this focus.”

Jen, College Professor and Student Teaching Supervisor

“In addition to being able to help our student-teachers deliver content effectively, I like a cooperating teacher to assist in providing an advisory environment where our pre-service teacher is able to be comfortable and learn to put advisory theory into practice.”

Armand, Middle School Principal

“My best advisors have had some training. They understand the stages of group development through which an advisory group passes and how the conducted activities correspond with the stages. I expect our student teachers to also have gained this knowledge through preparation in their college classes, which will help them to become strong advisors and, in turn, contribute to the strength of our advisory program in general.”

Sarah, Middle Level Mathematics Pre-service Teacher

“I want to participate in a strong advisory and have a cooperating teacher who is skilled in the advisor role. I don’t want to sit and just observe, but rather be playing an active part in the group and building upon the background I learned in my college coursework. With our state now requiring advisory as part of middle level personalization, we pre-service teachers are well aware we must be prepared to serve our students well in the advisory capacity.”

In a recent discussion pertaining to the best preparation for pre-service teachers training to become effective middle level advisors, the above individuals -- two middle level teachers, a principal, a college professor, and a middle level pre-service teacher -- shared their

insights to the question, “What understanding and background do pre-service teachers need in order to become effective middle level advisors?”

All five individuals are knowledgeable about best middle-level practice, feel a vibrant advisory program is an important part of a middle school day, have participated in advisory training in their respective schools, and realize this specific training is invaluable. Three, including the principal, have served as clinical supervisors and cooperating teachers for pre-service teachers and are professionals in a state, which in the fall of 2009 mandated advisory programs for all the middle schools.

All five individuals recognized the importance of pre-service teachers having strong preparation in their college coursework and in their field experiences. All five expect pre-service teachers to have some background in advisory, to understand the structure of advisories, and to be able to apply, in their advisories, some activities they have learned in their college courses. They also expect the middle school will have a personalized environment which includes an effective advisory program. All indicated advisory is the most difficult of all middle level programs to implement (Anfara & Brown, 2001; Fenwick, 1992), especially because many of them were not exposed to the preparation which exists today.

### **Understanding why we have advisory**

Three decades ago the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development issued its seminal report contending junior high schools were not responding well to the developmental needs of young adolescents. *Turning Points: Preparing America’s Youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (1989)* made recommendations to improve education for 10-15 year-olds at this crucial stage of development. Part of the report advocated breaking down large schools and creating small

learning communities, thereby better preparing young adolescents for success as adults (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). The National Middle School Association (NMSA), in *This We Believe* (1982, 1995, 2003), endorsed the same changes and promoted the first effective middle level design. As a result, middle level educators began restructuring their schools to be more aligned with the developmental characteristics and needs of this age group.

Out of these recommendations grew the call for the creation of effective student advisories: regular meetings of groups of 10 -12 students with an adult. Meeting regularly during the school day with the same group of students, advisors began to provide academic and social-emotional support and to facilitate a small peer community of learners (Cushman, 1990; Gallassi, et al, 2004; Juvonmen et al, 2004). The recent update of the 1989 report, *Turning Points 2000*, acknowledged with programs such as advisory, middle schools have made great strides in improving the quality of education for middle-level students (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Other research on early adolescents has shown that when students have a lasting, meaningful relationship with at least one caring adult in a school, academic achievement improves and drop out rates fall (Viadero, 2007; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2006).

Given conditions in today's world, i.e. earlier maturation of the early adolescents, fewer stable institutions in their lives, and more pressure on them in times of high stakes testing, the need for middle schools to advocate for effective comprehensive advisory programs is becoming more crucial. Schools must provide a place for students to discuss issues in their lives with peers and adults. In this complex time we live in, effective advisory programs are needed now more than ever. More schools are acknowledging this importance, as noted by two middle

level researchers in their recent national survey of middle level schools, indicating the percentage of middle schools with an advisory program has grown from 48% in 2001 to 53% in 2009 (McEwin and Greene, 2009).

### **Advisor Responsibilities**

Without exception, all five interviewed indicated one of the first things a cooperating teacher must do when the student teacher arrives is to take some time to share what it means to be an advisor. School leaders should establish responsibilities and roles for each advisor, and those roles should be understood by all advisors. Although they all agreed the roles may be somewhat similar from school to school, responsibilities vary because each school develops its own focus depending upon what best meets the needs of its students.

One cooperating teacher was pleased to share what it meant to be an advisor in her school. Her responsibilities included the following:

- The advisor, more than any other person in the school, will be the advocate for his or her advisees;
- The advisor will be informed of all school activities regarding his or her advisees and should act on that information accordingly;
- The advisor will strive to develop a feeling of trust and caring with each advisee;
- The advisor will provide a safe place for all advisees, which does not tolerate “put downs” of any kind;
- The advisor will serve as group leader and implement the building program as developed by the faculty;
- The advisor will be responsible for initiating conversations with parents regarding issues or sharing achievements; and
- The advisor will be responsible for assisting each advisee with his/her Individual Learning Plan.

She added these roles and responsibilities are well-understood by all personnel in her school, whether advisors or not, and these duties are included in both staff and substitute handbooks.

During their orientation new teachers learn these crucial elements of the school’s program.

## **Developing and Assessing One's Own Program**

Three of the interviewees talked about how creating, implementing, and sustaining an effective middle level advisory program requires much thoughtful consideration and takes at least a year to prepare. All indicated they had used the design team approach to plan their program with the entire faculty. Two of the schools used an experienced consultant and one school used NMSA's Professional Development Kit, *Launching a Successful Advisory Program* (Niska and Thompson, 2007).

All the design teams consisted of eight to ten individuals and were composed of self-selected, interested educators representing various interdisciplinary teams at all grade levels, including teachers, special education teachers, counselors, and administrators. All felt this approach empowered staff members to develop a common understanding of advisory and to work together in selecting the focus, making the organizational decisions, planning the curriculum content, devising the appropriate assessment instruments, and determining the most-needed professional development.

The general feeling was their programs were strong because they had a definite emphasis or purpose which was understood by all of the groups involved: students, advisors, counselors, administration, and parents. They commented since there are a number of emphases, no two advisory programs will look alike. Each school must determine what it feels is important and what it hopes to accomplish in its advisory program (The Education Alliance, 2003). All schools had first examined their mission statement and used the North Carolina card-sorting activity developed by Galassi, Gullledge and Cox (1998) to help them determine the purpose of their advisory program. All the schools had chosen an advocacy-community focus

and indicated it drove all the decisions: organization, curriculum, assessment, and professional development.

All the interviewees agreed the structure of an advisory program has an impact on how well the goals of the program were to be addressed. The design teams, through the use of surveys, stimulated fruitful conversations in determining the meeting time and length of the sessions necessary to meet the goals of the advisory program. Of those interviewees with programs, one school's advisory met every day for 25 minutes, one met three times a week for the same amount of time, and the last met twice a week for 30 minutes.

The interviewees agreed the development of a relationship between advisor and students is central, and activities can serve an important part in building group cohesion and getting to know each student (Crawford, 2008; Poliner & Lieber, 2004). After their school had chosen themes (e.g., getting acquainted, conflict resolution, building pride in their school, community service), the design teams put together binders with possible activities to use during advisory sessions, taking into account the developmental differences between sixth and eighth graders. Individual advisors could select other activities based upon the particular needs of the students in their group. Each binder contained the advisory mission statement, advisor role and responsibilities, calendar for each quarter, and possible activities to use.

The interviewees were very aware an evaluation process needed to be in place from the beginning (Spear, 2005). The formative evaluation at all schools used short surveys to look at how the program was progressing and what activities were working well. Two advisors shared that time was taken at faculty meetings for advisors to share their successes and to help each other with their concerns. This was accomplished by putting the staff into their own advisory

groups. All the respondents further indicated baseline indicators (number of student absences, discipline referrals, student-initiated school counselor contacts, increase in school activity involvement) were chosen and the data were examined yearly to determine advisory effects.

Finally, the interviewees shared the importance of ongoing professional development led by the design teams. Advisory planning updates and sample activities were shared at staff meetings the year prior to advisory implementation. One advisor approvingly reported her staff participated in a six-hour, culminating workshop the day before the program began. The program evolved and the design team became aware there were skill areas in which the faculty felt deficient, and more professional development was provided.

### **Advisor Skills Needed**

Part of this professional development was a response to the need for the skills to engage in the advisory sessions and one-on-one conferences. The interviewees stated advisors should know how to listen, offer constructive feedback, develop trusting relationships, communicate empathy, and refer a student in crisis. Several had been in training, including the pre-service teacher, when they were asked to reflect upon their own past as a 10-15 year old. Even if youth culture has changed, they gained a clearer view of what it is like to be an early adolescent. Additionally, they shared that advisors have pre-existing skills but need to reflect and to become aware of areas of improvement.

They all agreed with MacLaury (2002), the most successful advisors are the ones who are genuine, demonstrate unconditional positive regard for their students, and exhibit congruence between what they are feeling and how they behave. One commented,

“The more open I am, the more willing my advisees are willing to share. One of my college professors suggested we build a personal corner and include our college diploma

and personal photos of interest. My advisees are very interested in looking at my pictures and, in turn, begin to share more about themselves, and a common interest can lead to a stronger connection.”

The interviewees all stated advisors need to be comfortable with themselves and have skill in facilitating a group. All shared their perspective that as an advisory group passes through the stages of development, the advisor’s leadership style changes (MacLaury, 2002). All indicated they were more direct when first meeting their advisees and establishing a safe environment was a priority, including simple things like seating arrangements where all can speak (Crawford, 2008). As the year progressed the advisees learned to work together and the advisor was then able to step back and offer suggestions as needed. MacLaury’s (2002) work supports this approach, stating an advisor’s leadership style changes as the group develops through the five stages of preaffiliation, power and control, intimacy, differentiation, and termination. An advisor’s cognizance of each stage also allows him/her to select activities which are appropriate to that stage and this action, in turn, can assist members in the advisory to grow individually and collectively (Niska, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

As educators we have a very important role and we must realize it is not enough to just offer academic class work at this early adolescent age. For our students to succeed we have be able to carefully orchestrate their social as well as their intellectual climate. If they learn to understand themselves and to learn the social skills necessary to navigate their relationships with a variety of people, they stand an excellent opportunity to do well in school and eventually in the world. This must be the reinforcement we provide to our pre-service teachers.

The student teaching experience provides an opportunity for a pre-service teacher to practice what one has been learning in college classes. With so much focus on the cognitive

development, advisory is a place where getting to know the early adolescent well and helping him/her become a member of a community of peers takes precedence. Having a strong experience facilitating an advisory group helps the pre-service teacher to understand the importance of helping the whole student and to continue developing knowledge and skills to be a successful educator. As one advisor noted, "We are learning to be more effective in this advisory role, and we can also learn from our student teachers; we all can become better teachers when we are more effective advisors."

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