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Five Tips for Teaching Advisory Classes at Your School



Advisory programs, which are common in non-traditional schools, could help students improve their relationships and prepare for life outside school.

BY PATRICK COOK-DEEGAN | APRIL 6, 2017

Research shows that when students have a meaningful relationship with an adult at school, they are more likely to succeed academically—but traditional academic learning in high school often leaves little time to make these connections.

In the 1990s, schools started to take a greater interest in building more meaningful relationships between teachers and students—and one approach was the creation of what are known as “advisories,” advocated for in part by the Coalition of Essential Schools.



schools do.

In practice, advisory works in a myriad of ways at different schools. At some, it meets once a week for 30 minutes; at others, it is the heart of the school culture and meets nearly every day. Many traditional public schools still do not have advisory, but independent schools, charter schools, and more outside-the-traditional-box public

Advisory is one of the few places in high school where there is room to deliver high-quality social and emotional learning without “adding another thing” to already-packed high school schedules. Since advisory already has dedicated time at many schools, it is just a matter of using that time well.

Learning to take full advantage of advisory could increase students’ sense of belonging at school and improve their relationships with peers and adults. By teaching non-traditional academic skills or social-emotional skills, it could also better prepare students for life outside of school—whether that be college or a job. At its best, advisory can help students discover a sense of purpose and craft more meaningful lives.

Advisory is also one of the spaces with the most room for innovation in high school; unlike Algebra 1 or AP U.S. History, it does not have a set curriculum that must be covered over the school year. But few tools or well-designed set curricula are available to advisory teachers—which is why I started Project Wayfinder with Kelly Schmutte at the Stanford d.school’s K12 lab network.

Below are several tips for implementing advisory that we have learned while studying advisory programs and designing the Project Wayfinder Navigation Toolkit, to help you create a valuable and fulfilling experience for students.

1. Use advisory to intentionally foster a school culture

Advisory can be very similar to homeroom, in which case it may have little meaning for students. Or it can be *the* place that school culture is set by intentionally using the time to build the school culture you want. I have found that advisory is most powerful when it is a cornerstone of school culture.

This is just what Hillsdale High School in San Mateo does. In the 1990s, according to former teacher Jeff Gilbert, Hillsdale was “filled with apathy.” In 2000, the school underwent a massive re-design, and advisory became core to offering personalized learning and re-building the culture of the school.

“A powerful advisory is not a radical idea, but it is astonishing how few schools are able to make it happen,” says Gilbert. At Hillsdale, ninth graders are divided between three small schools, and students have the same adviser for two years, which helps them establish a meaningful relationship with an adult and with a core group of students from mixed racial and socio-economic backgrounds. Teachers, students, and administrators are on the same page: Advisory is to be taken seriously.

Today, “it is a completely different culture from the ’90s and advisory is at the center of it,” says Gilbert, now the principal. A decade after implementing its advisory program, Hillsdale scored in the 99th percentile on a school climate report card. And there are other, less quantifiable benefits Gilbert has observed, like more student relationships across racial and socioeconomic lines and greater communication and community amongst staff.

2. Give advisers strong support from the school



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Teachers are already overburdened and have too much to do. For them to be good advisers, they need the time to prep for advisory—and that means limiting their other duties.

For example, at Hillsdale, one-fifth of advisers’ academic time is set aside for advisory. This allows teachers to prep for advisory and signals that the school administration takes advisory seriously.

Going one step further, some schools have had success advising their advisers—hiring someone whose sole responsibility is to design and implement the advisory program. And this includes providing mentoring and advising to the advisory teachers themselves. At University High School (UHS) in San Francisco, each of their mentors has a mentor to check in with—which allows

each person to experience the value of an advising/mentoring relationship firsthand and feel supported in their work with students.

“One of our core principles is that mentors should receive as much support as they are expected to give,” says Alex Lockett, the Dean of UHS and visionary behind UHS’s mentoring program. “Investing in the well-being and professional needs of our mentors has been transformational for the student and faculty experience, leading to a calmer and healthier school climate.”

3. Create a safe and vulnerable environment

For advisory to work well, students have to *feel* different there than they do in other classrooms. The relationship with the adviser has to be different, they have to be willing to be more open, and they need to be engaged despite the lack of grades or black-and-white criteria for success.

When I was an advisory teacher, the strength of my connection with students was the biggest indicator of my success. To be a good adviser, you have to make efforts to connect with students in ways that are not traditionally encouraged in academic classrooms; you have to be willing to be real and vulnerable with students, like when I shared my own stories of being hazed and bullied on sports teams through adolescence. Otherwise, it will feel like just another classroom.

And you have to create an advisory culture where students feel safe talking about hard things and sharing personal feelings. Without this sense of safety in the class and classroom, advisory may not reach its potential. It is definitely worth taking the time at the beginning of the year to share your own journey in life and *why* you wanted to teach high school students. I found that once I shared *my own* “why” and some of my own chapters in life, students related to me differently and were more authentic with each other.

Finally, take the time to set your advisory class culture and develop a mutual understanding of how group sharing is going to *work*—and make sure that

students feel like they are co-creating the culture, not having it imposed on them. You might start each advisory session with a check-in, use a fun prompt to get things started, or show support for someone who is struggling. It is critical to establish overall protocols and daily feelings of safety before diving in.

4. Differentiate advisory curricula from normal schoolwork



Project Wayfinder materials

At Project Wayfinder, we have designed our Wayfinder Toolkit to look and feel very different from normal handouts that students get. From the paper that we print our material on, to the podcasts we are making and the videos we show, we want our activities and stories to feel unique. This signals to students that the experience is different *and* valuable, not just a time to mess around.

When we brought our materials to a school in Japan, the 45 students were silent while they looked at the activity. One of my guest co-instructors, who has led dozens of youth workshops, said he had never seen so many students so silent and engaged while looking over an activity.

The look, design, and sequencing of the advisory curricula matters a great deal. I was skeptical about this when I first launched the project, but I have

watched over and over how students take things seriously when you put a lot of thought and intention into their design.

5. Have a plan, but be flexible and adaptable

Although it's helpful to have a structure for your advisory sessions, rigid curricula can be detrimental to the outcomes you want in advisory; it's best to have a track but also be flexible and responsive. Often the best advisory sessions deal with what is coming up emotionally for students in the moment—like the loss of a student's loved one, or recent national news.

If you stick to a set curriculum, you can miss the juiciest potential, so leave lots of room for detours and additions. For Project Wayfinder, we have designed a “Journey Track”—a sequenced track for teachers to follow, with space for a number of activities to use at a given moment depending on the situation. We have the activities tagged by certain learning outcomes and moods of the class, so that a teacher can find a good activity on the fly if the day's planned lesson does not feel quite right.

6. Ask the big questions

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mindfulness curricula (which I taught for years at different high schools) fail to address them. Instead, they focus on skills and tool development, like

Adolescence is fundamentally about the process of identity formation and individuation. It is the time in life to start asking the question: What do I want to do with my one wild and precious life?

Unfortunately, high school leaves little time to answer these core human questions. Even some social-emotional learning and

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managing emotions and attention. They do not focus on students' "why"—their purpose—and their "what"—what they are going to do in order to fulfill it.

What use is attention and emotional regulation if students have not addressed the deeper, more fundamental questions: What is most important to me? How do I want to live my life? And how will I lead a purpose-driven, meaningful life?

My hope is that Project Wayfinder will help students *and* educators dive down deeper than a normal advisory, social-emotional learning, or mindfulness program. Ultimately, students need to discover their "why" and then start to experiment with their "what." Advisory is the best place already baked into the school schedule to start asking what I call the "big questions." And introducing students to these questions in high school is some of the best education and guidance we can provide them.

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