

An Argument for Advisory

I have to say it [CPR in advisory] is pretty fun because you get to know your classmates better and you get to play games that are fun and also funny, and you can tell your plans and other things you like to do. It makes a difference. It wakes you up because you get to feel the joy in the room.

—middle school advisory student, Red Lake MN

THE POWER OF HEALTHY COMMUNITY

Young adolescents exhibit many of the signs of adulthood. Some have reached their adult height; many have part-time jobs and social lives separate from their families. They clearly are no longer little kids, but it is a mistake to think that they need less support and tending from their teachers and parents than their younger counterparts. The key is balance. We have to allow them as much independence as they can responsibly handle, and at the same time support and guide them along the way. With our help, they can experience what it's like to operate successfully within a caring, inclusive, safe school community to which they feel connected, a community within which they can grow and have fun at the same time.

In a small K-8 school, the Circle of Power and Respect (CPR) meeting formed the heart of the advisory program. In the circle, students shared what was going on in their lives, good and bad. They greeted each other every morning, and even if you weren't there, you knew the group was saying hi to you. In the circle they had their best laughs, and they played games—sometimes silly, sometimes challenging games, in which no one ever really lost and everyone was included. The circle was the heart of their community.

One day Angela, an 8th grader at the school, acted up on the bus ride home, and as a result she forfeited her right to ride the school bus for a week. On the third day of that week, a public bus strike began, and Angela had no transportation. Her father agreed to give her a ride downtown, and then she called the principal to request a pickup downtown. “I really want to be there! Could somebody please, please come get me? I’m not far away!” Someone did.

On another day, a 7th grader listened to an announcement that no school buses would be coming into her area until the debris from the big storm the night before was hauled away. She grabbed her hat and coat, and announced to her mother that she was walking the six miles to school. “I’m not going to miss school just because of that stupid storm!” She set out on the walk, which got her to school just in time for the beginning of CPR.

“Good morning, Bethany. What’s up?” one of the boys in the circle said.

“Good morning, Roberto. I’m glad to be here—I walked the whole way from my house!”

—7th/8th grade advisory, Minneapolis MN

Those are stories of a pull towards school strong enough to overcome big obstacles. That’s the kind of connection a caring learning community can create. And a good part of the energy behind it was a lively, friendly, interesting advisory that met the needs of its adolescent participants.

This Book and Adolescent Needs: Designing a Path to Student Success

The Advisory Book is rooted in the belief that every idea for teaching middle level students is only as good as its capacity to meet the needs of young adolescents in a constructive way. It offers practical ways to meet the social and emotional needs of middle level students every school day. Through an advisory period of 15 to 30 minutes a day, teachers can offer students a consistent, dependable opportunity to get to know themselves and each other, to build social strengths, to warm up their thinking selves in a wide variety of mentally challenging games and relevant activities, and to have fun doing so. Two structures for advisory—Circle of Power and Respect and Activity Plus—are described in detail and with great variety. Once familiar, they become powerful formats for helping to ensure that each school day is productive, safe, and enjoyable for everyone.

Dr. James P. Comer of the Yale Child Study Center Project proposes that “many practices in education that have been developed over the past two decades have been less successful than they might have been because they have focused primarily on curriculum, instruction, assessment, and modes of service delivery,” neglecting to base their instructional work on the principles of child and adolescent development. (Comer, 2005)

We have chosen to use these two basic structures as the bones of the advisory program, because once a teacher has mastered them, they can serve as containers for any content a teacher wishes to use. A repeatable format becomes simple to implement, and when there is a rich variety of possibilities

within that format, you have the best of both worlds: a comfortable routine, and a large variety of activities for breadth, depth, and enjoyment. Then out of the various advisories communities, a school community is born, a place where students feel connected and appreciated—a place where they want to be.

A meta-analysis of 207 studies of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs which involved a broadly representative group of almost 300,000 students from urban, suburban, and rural elementary and secondary schools found that students who participate in school-based social-emotional learning programs (compared to students who do not experience SEL) profit in multiple ways (CASEL, 2007). They improve significantly in:

1. Social and emotional skills
2. Attitudes about themselves, others, and school
3. Social and classroom behavior
4. Achievement-test scores and school grades

It isn't enough to offer only academic course work, no matter its quality. For adolescents to succeed, we have to carefully orchestrate their social as well as their intellectual climate. If they get help in working and playing with their peers, and if they learn the social skills necessary to navigate their relationships with a wide variety of people, they stand a good chance of doing well in school. Most of the adolescents referred to in this book are young ones, ages 11-14, but much of what is offered is also applicable to older adolescents, who share many of the same needs as their younger counterparts.

MAKING THE ADVISORY ROOM OUR OWN

Traditionally in many middle schools, advisories and homerooms do something to make their space their own. Posters, charts, names, photographs of the advisory students—all of these help create a sense of ownership and belonging.

Daily News

Wednesday, September 16, 20__

Felicitations, Eagle Advisory!

Today we get to create things that will give our advisory room a special look. Sign up for the project you want to work on. The limit is six people per project.

Eagle Door Poster Our Class Agreements Our Declarations Greetings & Games Book

The materials for each project are located in the four corners of the room. Circle up and I'll give you your instructions there.

Go, Eagles!

Mr. Lopez

Greeting (1 - 2 minutes in circle)

Basic Greeting, Hand Jive Greeting, or any other quick greeting

Activity (15 - 20 minutes)

Making a door poster, a poster list of class or school rules, a poster list of advisory students and their goals for the year, a poster or ring book of CPR greetings and games

Spark: (Circle) Students sign up to work on one of the projects. Teacher provides a planning sheet to each group. They draw up a plan for what their poster will look like, what materials they will need, and who is working on the poster.

Work time: Students work in groups to fill out their plan sheets and bring them to the teacher for approval and/or recommendations. If there's time, students gather materials and sketch out the poster in pencil. Project is completed in 1 or 2 subsequent advisories.

Reflection (2 - 3 minutes in circle, partners, or small groups; if time, a few share with whole group)

Students choose and answer a process or content question such as:

What was fun about the activity today?

Do you think the poster you are working on will turn out well? What's your evidence?

What is one way that your group got along well to get the job done?

What is a problem your group had to solve?

Plan for Success

Establishing their own, special environment within which your advisory will meet each day will increase student enjoyment and sense of belonging. For the work quality to be good enough to display all semester or year, brainstorm standards for a good poster ahead of time.