Advisory: Advocacy for Every Student

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"Mr. B., I got a 93 on my test!" Marisa rushed into my room between second and third periods to tell me the good news. For several weeks we had been discussing her lack of success in math. An honor student in seventh grade, Marisa was suddenly earning Cs and Ds on her eighth grade algebra tests. She was considering a tutor or possibly dropping to a lower ability level; recently she had begun attending math extra-help sessions. In my dual roles as Marisa's advisor and teacher, I saw her four times daily—morning advisory, social studies, lunch, and English. Once a month I had a 40-minute advisory conference with Marisa to discuss school and life in general. An accomplished actress who enjoyed playing lacrosse, Marisa regularly shared with me the joys and woes of being thirteen; math was one of her burdens. I listened sympathetically as she voiced her frustrations (she knew that I was interested in her eventual success), and I suggested extra-help sessions. That is about all I did. Marisa did the rest.

This We Believe, National Middle School Association's basic position paper, asserts that developmentally responsive middle level schools are characterized by, among other things, "an adult advocate for every student" (National Middle School Association, 1995, p. 16). Why adult advocacy? What is it? And why is it important that the adults who teach middle level students also act as their advocates? Why should "each student [have] one adult who knows and cares for that individual and who supports that student's academic and personal development?" (National Middle School Association, 1995, p. 16).

Advocating for young adolescents is necessarily problematic as they navigate the transition from elementary to middle school, as their bodies grow and change, as they develop new interests and new peer groups, as they probe boundaries and test limits, as they explore a rapidly changing world via the Internet, as they consume a daily bombardment of advertising on television and in magazines, as they consider the varied messages embedded in the lyrics and music of current popular artists, as they confront shocking headlines, and as they edge tentatively, yet inexorably, towards maturity. Some emerging adolescents weather the turbulence with few upsets; others inhabit self-centered lives redolent with roller-coaster drama; still others experience pain and suffering resulting from abusive settings or unhealthy choices, or both. Clearly, educating today's youth is as great a challenge as it ever was.

Many middle level schools respond to the question of advocacy by instituting advisory programs, also know as advisor/advisee, Prime Time, or Home Base. Whatever they are called, most advisory programs share several common attributes: a designated staff member responsible for a small group of students; regularly scheduled meetings of the advisory group; ongoing individual conferences between the advisor and the advisees during the school year; administrative support for advisory activities; parent contact with the school through the child's advisor; and, most importantly, an adult advocate for each young adolescent.

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According to *This We Believe*, the obligation of a developmentally responsive middle level school is to provide "a continuity of caring that extends over the student's entire middle level experience so that no student is neglected" (National Middle School Association, 1995, p. 17). An advisory program enables that "continuity of caring" to take root. 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.

In 1989 the Carnegie Corporation, in its landmark publication *Turning Points*, presented eight recommendations for transforming the education of young adolescents and middle grade schools. The first recommendation endorsed the creation of smaller communities of learning; it also called for an adult advisor for each student. "The effect of the advisory system," noted the report, "appears to be to reduce alienation of students and to provide each young adolescent with the support of a caring adult who knows that student well. That bond can make the student's engagement and interest in learning a reality" (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, p. 41). Eight years earlier, Joan Lipsitz, then engaged in research for her acclaimed book, *Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, encountered that phenomenon—the absence of alienation—at Shoreham-Wading River Middle School when she was told by a seventh grade girl, "They absolutely know me here" (Lipstiz, 1984). Would that every middle school student in every middle level school could make the same declaration!

That notion—students being known and knowing that they are known by the adults in the building—is at the heart of advocacy. The two most important jobs middle level educators have is to know the students they teach and to address their varied needs. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is unambiguous on this point: "Accomplished [middle level] generalists draw on their knowledge of early adolescent development and their relationships with students to understand and foster their students' knowledge, skills, interests, aspirations, and values" (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1994, p. 9). If teachers expect students to be engaged learners, they must communicate to those students that they are cared for, respected, welcomed, and appreciated. Young adolescents need affirmation. They need support. They need to know that those who are charged with educating them are also concerned about them. Advisory programs communicate that interest.

And yet, some schools that initiated programs during the past two decades lost sight of that concern. Too many advisory programs foundered because advisory was seen as a curriculum to be covered rather than a relationship to be nurtured. And while it is more difficult to develop relationships than it is to conduct paper and pencil activities, one goal of every educator ought to be a more intimate school setting for students. Jim Burns, a former NMSA staff member, recently observed:

> We've learned over the years that our thinking of [advisory] as a time of day and a set place to do a certain routine set of activities just didn't work. It's very important to the school community that people talk and have relationships Hopefully we're moving past advisory programs as just "ten minutes a day" kinds of things, and we're moving into something more meaningful. We're finding that it doesn't really matter when [schools] do [advisory] as long as the community is talking and people are getting to know one another. (Burns, 1998)

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In his seminal work, *A Middle School Curriculum: From Rhetoric to Reality*, Beane (1993) argues that "the central purpose of the middle school curriculum should be helping early adolescents explore self and social meanings at this time in their lives" (p. 18). When teachers serve as advisors to sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, they receive daily, if not hourly, reminders of what it is like to be a young adolescent in today's fast-paced world. Through conversation and contact with their charges, teachers gain useful insights into early adolescence that they can then weave into the ongoing classroom experience over the course of the school year.

Many young adolescents are concerned about issues other than school, and they need assistance in facing the future:

> Often, the predominant question teens have while trying to exist in the larger, more anonymous middle schools is whether life is really worth living. If we want them to answer this question with "Yes, life is worth living," then we must find the ways and time to give them the personal attention and support they need to grow up as healthy people in both body and mind. Support must come before challenge to help young people grow. (Rubinstein, 1994, p. 26)

Advocacy programs that focus on the needs of young adolescents provide such attention and support. As the old adage goes, "Kids don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

How to begin? One useful approach is by having a faculty committee frame a mission statement that describes the nature and purpose of the advisory program for that school. In 1973, a group of advisors at Shoreham-Wading River Middle School drafted the following passage, still employed a quarter of a century later as the basic definition of SWR's nationally recognized program:

> Advisory is essentially a comprehensive, school-oriented, one-to-one relationship between the advisor and the advisee for the purposes of communication and direction. Advisory enables each student to have an adult advocate in the school, a person who can champion the advisee's cause in student-teacher, student-administrator, and student-student interactions. (Shoreham-Wading River Middle School, 1973)

Advisors need to know what is expected of them as they advocate for young adolescents. A staff committee can compose a list of responsibilities—a job description—for advisors in the program. Often among these tasks are taking attendance, disseminating school announcements, collecting lunch money, handling minor discipline issues and communicating with the families of advisees. The NMSA position paper states that "the advocate is the primary person at the school with whom the family makes contact when communicating about the child" (National Middle School Association, 1995, p. 17). Also, when teachers "make themselves available to counsel and advise students on a wide range of issues from academic progress to peer relationships to extra-curricular opportunities," they form "constructive relationships" which enable students to become better learners and more responsible citizens (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1994, p. 9). Such relationships also provide teachers with "a window to see more sharply aspects of their students' character, values, interests and talents that might otherwise be overlooked" (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1994, p. 9-10).

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How does a teacher learn to become an effective advisor? Staff development opportunities are helpful, especially when veteran advisors share their experience with beginning advisors. Also, a positive attitude leads to expertise developed over time. Jane Wittlock, a veteran middle school teacher and administrator at Shoreham-Wading River Middle School, responded to the question, *"What kind of training should an advisor have?"* in the following manner: "I don't think training could really help. If you don't love ten to fourteen year olds initially, nothing could help you become an advisor. If you think this age group is truly special, then you'll be a good advisor" (Shoreham-Wading River Middle School, 1989). Her response emphasizes the attitudinal nature of advisory. It is not a program of monthly or weekly activities, nor is it a curriculum to be followed or "covered." Rather, advisory can best be described as a relationship between the advisor and the advisee.

What a school values shows up in the master schedule. In order for effective advisor/advisee relationships to blossom, the schedule must allow time for advisory activities to occur. Group meetings, individual conferences, parent conferences, program evaluation—all of these will appear in the school calendar where there is a serious commitment to making advisory work.

When creating advisory groups, small numbers work best. If every teacher serves as an advisor, the load is shared evenly and more students are better served. An ideal advisory group contains ten to twelve students. Advocacy takes time, and the smaller the group size, the more effective the advisor can be.

Whether beginning an advisory program or evaluating one that has been in place for many years, it is useful to provide the staff with opportunities to discuss, design, and modify the operational aspects of the program. Faculty meetings can be devoted to this purpose. The following set of questions may prove helpful for purposes of discussion, design, implementation, clarification, evaluation, and direction:

1. What does the school's mission statement say regarding advocacy?
2. What does "advocacy" mean? What are the parameters?
3. What does the advisory program mission statement say?
4. What are the basic responsibilities of an advisor?
5. Who in the school will "manage and maintain" the advisory program?
6. How will advisory groups be formed?
7. When do advisors meet with advisees in groups? When do advisors meet individually with advisees?
9. How will issues of confidentiality be handled?
10. Who will mediate differences of opinion among advisors regarding the resolution of problems with students?
11. What happens when a student wants to switch from one advisory group to another?
12. Should advisory groups contain students all at the same grade level or at different grade levels?
13. Should the advisor continue with his/her advisees all through middle school, or should each student have a new advisor each year?
14. Should an advisee attend an advisor/parent conference?
15. What happens when parents want to meet with a teacher other than the child's advisor?
16. How and when will the advisory program be evaluated?

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Ultimately, "an advisory system is a simple method that ensures that no secondary school student (middle school, junior high school, or high school) becomes anonymous" (Goldberg, 1997, p. 1). Anonymity leads to alienation; and, in the minds of many young people, a feeling of alienation sanctions anti-social behavior. Advocacy for all minimizes the number of students who fall through the cracks. Education has always been a "human" business, and an advisory program "will appeal to any middle, junior or high school that wishes to emphasize personalization" (Goldberg, 1997, ix). The more humane and caring the school is, the more readily a strong sense of community will flourish.

Why adult advocacy? Because the roles and responsibilities of teachers call for it. As Rubinstein (1994) so eloquently maintained in *Hints for 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). Advocacy for young adolescents provides affirmation and acceptance at a critical time in their lives. It is an essential element of the developmentally responsive middle level school. After all, "the nature of the educational programs young adolescents experience during this formative period of life will, in large measure, determine the future for all of us" (National Middle School Association, 1995, p. 33).

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