

HORACE

Are Advisory Groups 'Essential'? What They Do, How They Work

If even one person in a school knows him well enough to care, a student's chances of success go up dramatically. In small groups that can focus on a range of subjects, teachers and students are forming new bonds and setting new standards for a more personal education.

WHEN TEACHERS at Kentucky's Fairdale High School were planning the start of their Essential School program, principal Marilyn Hohmann likes to recall, some of them spent a full week shadowing students through their daily schedules. By week's end, they were overwhelmed—not by the demands of student life, but by its passive and anonymous nature. If their program could do only one thing, they decided, it must be to turn those qualities around, to energize the students into forging an active personal stake in their own education. Today, Fairdale schedules a daily half-hour Teacher Guided Assistance period for all students—an advisory group in which 17 mixed-grade students work individually and together on both personal and academic matters. A whopping 90 percent of students call it the best thing about their school.

At Pasadena High School last year, all 650 ninth graders began an Essential School program that called for an hour-long advisory period three days a week. In groups of 20 to 30, students met with their teacher-adviser for activities designed to foster leadership, build self-esteem, and resolve conflicts. By the end of the year in this urban California high school with a 75 percent minority student body, the ninth-grade attendance rate was 96 percent—twice as high as for any

other grade in the school.

The faculty at Bellefonte Area High School, a small school in a mostly white, blue-collar Pennsylvania community, voted to go slowly this year on the startup of their Essential School program through the state's Re:Learning project. But though only two-thirds of Bellefonte's ninth-grade class will follow an Essential curriculum this year, the whole school decided to institute a daily fifteen-minute Active Communication Time (ACT) period, scheduled into the lunch hour. To help teachers who are uneasy about what to do with the time, the school provides a handbook of guidelines and suggested activities for the 15-student groups. And advisers are backed by a team of professionals that is called in for counseling, guidance, or intervention when a serious problem arises.

Making a student's education more personal is the base on which all the common principles of Essential schooling stand; and in many schools like these, advisory groupings are emerging as one way to work toward this aim. If even one teacher in a school knows a student well and cares what happens to her, the theory goes, chances increase dramatically for that student's academic success. More, advisory groups can promote the principles of unanxious expectation, trust, and decency in students' relations with their teachers and

others, both in school and outside it.

But are advisory groups the path toward personalizing a student's school experience, or merely a lightweight substitute for paying individual attention to intellectual development in the classroom itself? Should life issues be included in advisory sessions, or should their focus be primarily academic? Where is the line between teacher and guidance counselor, between adviser and parent-substitute, between private dilemmas and

social or intellectual obligations? As we looked at such programs in a dozen Essential schools nationwide, it became clear that advisories serve as a lightning rod for many of the most provoking questions facing school people today. Whether the advisory group is "essential"—a key tool in a school's commitment to the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools—is a question individual schools must explore as they move toward change.

What Are Advisories For?

One view of the advisory's purpose assumes that to know a student individually means to know his mind well—the better to work with him in a classroom context. For best results, argues the Coalition's Director for Schools, Bob McCarthy, the system should match advisers with students they actually teach, not arbitrarily as is sometimes done. Further, the purpose of an advisory session should be to work on developing, both individually and in a group context, the inquiring habits of mind that mark a scholar. Socratic seminars, book discussion groups, debate on school and community issues, and philosophical investigations might all augment one-on-one coaching in this model of the advisory relationship.

But many of the programs we looked at were shaped along much different lines. To know a student's mind well is not enough, they posit; if his education is truly to have meaning in the real world, it must address his situation in society too. The advisory group is used, in these schools, to practice skills in group dynamics and human relations that can be used for everything from governing a school to making the most personal decisions. And the individual commitment teachers make to their advisees aims to forge bonds that include the student's home and private life as a crucial part of schooling.

In practice, if we try to separate advisory groups into two models, the academic and the personal, the lines between them will quickly blur. "Kids don't let you do it," says Bob McCarthy. "They are going to push you to take an intellectual discussion into a concrete realm that makes sense in their world." Likewise, advisory groups may discuss the most personal of issues while applying principles of evidence and argument that train students in critical thinking. "If you start a discussion about what you'd

Some Advisory Group Models

Some ways advisory groups can be organized and scheduled:

- As a credit-bearing hour-long daily Family Group meeting, including one day weekly set aside for help with academic work. Mixed ages and grades. Adviser-student ratio 1:18. (University Heights High School, New York City)
- As a 30-minute Teacher Guided Assistance (TGA) period scheduled mid-morning to accommodate vocational students coming and going from the school. Adviser-student ratio 1:17; mixed ages and grades. TGA advisers are chosen by students, who sign up until group is full; new students are assigned to groups. (Fairdale High School, Louisville, Kentucky)
- As a 15-minute time slot called Active Communication Time (ACT) somewhere in the course of a 1 1/2-hour lunch period. Home room is eliminated, but first period and last period are lengthened by five minutes each for announcements. Groups organized by grade level. Adviser-student ratio 1:15-17; administrators also serve as advisers. (Bellefonte Area High School, Pennsylvania)
- As a 40-minute planned time once a week, plus discretionary time for enrichment and assistance built into class time at discretion of teaching teams. Adviser-student ratio 1:12-13. (Chatham High School, New York)
- As a lunch-period group meeting weekly, plus an individual meeting between student and adviser for 20-25 minutes every other week, plus a whole-school governing meeting once weekly in the last long afternoon block. Mixed grade levels. Adviser-student ratio 1:15. (Scarsdale Alternative High School, New York)
- As a 20-minute group meeting with adviser during lunch period. Adviser-student ratio 1:8-10. Single grade level. (Central Falls High School, Rhode Island)
- As an hour-long period three times weekly (alternated with health class), scheduled after major academic blocks and before lunch. Mixed ages and grades. Adviser-student ratio 1:20-30. (Pasadena High School, California)
- As one full day weekly of conferences and home visits, with no scheduled classes; plus individual meetings during adviser's one free period daily. Mixed ages and grades. Adviser-student ratio 1:20-25. (Metro High School, Cedar Rapids, Iowa)
- As a 25-minute homeroom period. Same grade level. Adviser-student ratio 1:25. One day monthly given to individual counseling with all teachers plus peer group counseling. (Paschal High School, Fort Worth, Texas)

do if you were drafted to fight for oil against Iraq," says McCarthy, "the answer has to be worked out against a real investigation of the political and economic situation in the Middle East and the West."

In fact, some of the best advisory group discussions start with historical, literary, or scientific situations that pose compelling moral dilemmas. In her 1984 book *Making Decisions*, from which several exercises are reproduced here, Nancy Faust Sizer sets out such cases in 26 pairs—one drawn from students' own environment, one from the world at large—to encourage analytical thinking and moral reasoning. Emphasizing respect for the reasoning process over the actual outcome of the decision, she argues, allows students to "compare, dissect, resolve" their common and individual principles. (Published by Longman Publishing Group in White Plains, New York, the book is currently out of print; for more information contact Nancy Sizer, P.O. Box 472, Harvard, MA 01451.)

In the end, it seems, the main point of a good advisory program is to help the student feel that it matters what he is doing with his

mind and his life—and to recognize the ways in which the two relate.

"The adviser is often the only adult in school who has a clear notion of a student's whole schedule, whole day, and whole life," says Rick Lear, a senior researcher at the Coalition of Essential Schools. "It makes the system much more sensitive when a kid has a problem. The adviser has a sense of whether the problem lies in an academic area, or with a particular teacher, or in some life problem. Advisers become advocates for kids in the system—sometimes they are even referred to explicitly by that title."

Is it really necessary to make formal time for teacher-student interaction in order to attain a more personal education? "Very good teachers often have this kind of relationship with their students already," says Kent Lowry, a teaching intern and adviser at New York's Scarsdale Alternative High School, where advisory "core groups" have long been in place. "But setting aside a time especially for that purpose means things that might otherwise slip through the cracks can be caught. I've always enjoyed chatting with kids when I run into them informally, but it's rare for that kind of discussion to come to any real conclusion. Our core groups have the time to work through an issue. It's enormously satisfying, for kids and teachers both." Making advisory groups a formal part of a school's system also means that every student—not just the most engaging, or the easiest to talk to—gets personal attention, Lowry notes. "It communicates that everyone is valued here," he says.

How Advisories Differ

In practice, the advisory groups we saw included a broad mix of purposes and techniques. Sometimes academic or even remedial in nature, sometimes almost purely social or personal, they have grown from each school's own vision of its needs and priorities, its students

and its community.

The adviser-student relationship may be as simple as a brief daily encounter in which students can touch base with someone who has a special interest in their progress. It may have a primarily administrative focus, with the adviser monitoring attendance, helping plan a schedule, and meeting to discuss grades and future plans. Or it may provide a steady arena in which intellectual habits and challenges are addressed.

"One of the best advisory sessions I have seen was at Paschal High School in Fort Worth, Texas," says Coalition Chairman Ted Sizer. "The teacher organized kids into small groups to work on homework in various subject areas. She went from group to group, guiding them individually and encouraging them to help each other out too. The whole purpose was to make sure the students were as ready as they could be to make good use of their formal class time." In this group, students were clearly active learners, and the teacher served as the generalist-coach, who was there to help them teach themselves. This is also the model used in Fairdale's Teacher Guided Assistance (TGA) program, which encourages students to make up tests during advisory time, seek extra help from teachers, or visit the library. "Our groups mix kids from different grade levels," says principal Hohmann, "so a lot of peer tutoring goes on during TGA."

Academic enrichment is also built into advisory sessions when teachers use them as book discussion groups. "Two things could happen at once," one principal says who favors this model for his school. "The kids could stretch their minds by reading interesting works of clear value, maybe introducing controversial issues; and their discussions could generate critical thinking and get teachers and kids to know each other as they explore different important questions through reading."



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Building a strong student role in their own government is an important aim of some advisory groups. At Scarsdale, for example, the 75 students of the alternative school gather in a weekly community meeting to vote on governance issues facing the school. Much of the discussion surrounding these issues takes place in the more manageable context of core group meetings. "It takes a while to clarify these things," Kent Lowry says. "When we address them first in small groups, the whole-school meeting is much more effective." In other schools too, student government issues are often addressed in advisory groups. In fact, at the much larger Pasadena High School, principal Judy Codding has brought in Scarsdale's Anthony Arenella and Rosellen Rachinelli to lead workshops in student governance techniques, using advisory groups as their basic unit.

Almost all advisory programs make some effort to help students plan for career and college, though few actually substitute advisory groups for conventional college and

vocational guidance counseling. Planning field trips to colleges and career fairs, practicing interviews, and doing exercises designed to identify personal strengths and goals all can take place in advisory groups.

Some advisory groups carry out community service projects; and some schools use the time for special presentations or other activities that bring the school community together. At Pasadena High School, teacher Judy Oksner has brought in speakers from area prisons, local artists, and junior achievement groups who rotate among advisory groups or speak to the school at large. "We also use the time for theatre games or athletic round robins—sometimes purely silly competitions just for fun—so that students can get to know those in other groups," Oksner says.

Advising the "Whole Student"

Scarsdale's core groups have developed a tradition of meeting in the students' homes on a weekly rotating basis. This is unusual; but in most schools getting to know the

students' home situation is an integral task of the adviser. Many schools expect advisers to call parents regularly not only with problems but with praise for a student's progress; regular home visits and parent conferences are a feature of several programs we looked at. In addition, advisers often check on absent students, make sure they keep up with their work when ill, or arrange professional help if necessary.

Most advisory systems also serve as the first step in resolving discipline issues, either individually or in the group. At New York City's University Heights High School, where "family groups" of around 18 students meet daily, a representative of each group serves on the school's "fairness committee," which resolves discipline problems by consensus. "The term 'advisory' implies an adult giving advice," says principal Nancy Mohr, who frequently leads workshops on advisories. "Our model is based on group work."

Across town at Central Park East Secondary School, an hour-long

A Friend Is Dropped

When Sandy and Jenny started school as new sophomores in September, they got along very well. They had French and basketball in common, and the rest seemed to go along of its own accord. They kept lots of company with each other for the first few weeks.

As time went on, however, there was little doubt that they were headed for different crowds. Jenny was sophisticated, impulsive, charming; she knew more kids in the school from the first day. Her parents were both fancy lawyers, which Sandy found hard even to imagine. Sandy's father worked in a drugstore and her mother was a housewife. She was shy, and found it harder to make friends.

Looks were a lot of it. Jenny was tall and pretty, with long dark hair. Sandy blamed herself for being "too medium": medium height and weight, and medium brown hair.

Jenny felt terrible about it, but slowly she began to drop Sandy as a friend. She still liked her. They hadn't had a fight or anything, but after a while she even stopped walking to basketball practice with her. She

hoped she'd never have to explain it. But she really didn't know how she could fit Sandy in with her new friends.

Questions to ask:

- Is it true that one can tell what a person is like by who his friends are? In what ways?
- Why did the friendship between Sandy and Jenny take place? Why did it change?
- How much do looks influence one's friendships? How much should they?
- Are teenagers more influenced by looks than adults? If so, are there good explanations for this?
- Did Jenny have the right to drop Sandy? Would Sandy have had the right to drop Jenny?
- Which would be more justifiable and why?
- How much does one's social class influence one's friendships? In what specific ways? What are the best indicators of what one's social class might be?

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advisory period is also scheduled daily, and discipline problems go directly to the adviser. "One day I was leading a humanities class and two students from my advisory group were brought in to me with an argument: they had to work together on a math project and one kid wasn't bringing in his share of the work," former CPE teacher Michael Goldman recalls. "When I had a moment I went to the back of the room to talk with them. I knew that the second kid's parents were divorcing, and sure enough, the problem came up because he was living in two different places and the work kept getting left behind. Addressing the question in a way that let the kid know someone cared about his situation made it much easier to work out a solution."

Goldman is among the many teachers who have used "dialogue journals" between students and teachers as a private arena in which to bring up important issues. Others go even further, introducing exercises in group dynamics to train students to open up emotional and behavioral issues. Such teachers see their activities as educating the whole person, not invading a private arena. "If you can't identify what you think and feel and why, you won't get far in an intellectual discussion," one said. "Listening, problem-solving, and conflict resolution are life skills and analytical skills. They require training and practice."

The Problems, the Rewards

Whether their focus is primarily academic or personal, advisory groups require new roles for most public school teachers, and they are often frightening ones. To advise a group well may take training in new skills, and it will certainly take more time, both to prepare for the advisory sessions and to invest in individual students. The results, say those who do it, are well worth the effort; but in the process new questions are raised about the roles teachers and students should play

Lying: The Choices We Make

In her two books, *Lying* and *Secrets*, Sissela Bok discusses different forms of deception, and their various uses and justifications in modern life. She also gives many examples of deceptions: stated and unstated, blatant and subtle, "necessary" and unnecessary, omissions and exaggerations, some undertaken "for" others, others for oneself, some undertaken in order to uncover even deeper deceptions, or to reveal an even deeper truth.

Many of us tolerate what we call "white" lies because we think that they are harmless, or undertaken to avoid disharmony or for a good purpose. Mrs. Bok, however, asserts that lies are always taken more seriously by those who have been lied to than by those who have lied. She believes that one must be careful to avoid them, no matter how "innocent" they may appear, because of what they can do to an atmosphere of trust.

Listed below are examples of such more "innocent" deceptions:

- A teacher exaggerates the abilities of her student in a college recommendation letter
- A person says he has a headache in order to avoid a party he doesn't want to attend
- A police car is unmarked
- A doctor lets his patient go on holiday without telling him that he is dying of cancer
- A mother tells her daughter that she looks nice when she really doesn't.

Mrs. Bok also cites examples of deceptions or purposeful concealments that cannot be called "innocent," even in quotation marks, either because they are far more blatant or are more self-serving. Yet these are practices that are widespread—and increasing—in modern life:

- A researcher claims to be measuring one reaction when he is really measuring another
- A lawyer creates an alibi in order to keep her innocent client out of jail
- The prince dresses up as a shepherd to find out what is really happening in his kingdom
- Parents tell their child that there are monsters in a deep pond
- A scientist is so convinced of the essential truth of his discovery that he falsifies his data slightly so that he can publish his findings quickly.

Questions to ask:

- Why is each of the above deceptions defensible?
- In what sense is it nevertheless a lie?
- Do you think that all lying is inherently dangerous?
- Are there ever valid excuses for lying?
- Is there a difference between social proprieties (e.g., saying "thank you" for a gift you don't like) and lying?
- Do you agree with the criteria named above (self-serving, blatant, and so forth) or do you have different criteria for making such distinctions?
- When one "lies" for another, can that be understood and tolerated?
- Are lies (in which language is used) more serious than deceptions (allowing others to believe something that is not true)?

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in our educational system.

No one denies that advisory groups make extra work for teachers. If the group's goals are well articulated, to reach them involves careful planning—in essence, an entire new curriculum may emerge, including anything from consensus building and human relations to philosophical explorations, study skills, or career planning. Some schools, believing that the main point is to get to know students

better, leave the use of advisory time completely up to individual teachers and groups. Others set up more formal expectations, but allow substantial variation in how to meet them. In either case, preparing for an advisory session is just as important as preparing for a class, and many schools help teachers out with handouts, workshops, and suggestions.

"Typically people start out trying to narrowly describe what

they will do, so it won't be overwhelming," says the Coalition's Rick Lear, who often works with schools just beginning advisory efforts. "Then as teachers get to know kids they develop their own sense of what's appropriate and what their limits are. Within any one building there will be a range of responses—those who are more comfortable will make themselves more available to both students and parents." Still, he concedes, advisories do take more time than people once expected. "You're getting involved in the lives of kids," he says.

Some teachers thrive on this; others back off from the intensity of the experience. In his days at Central Park East Mike Goldman, for example, would give students and parents his home phone and set evening calling hours for between six and seven. "I never once had a student or parent abuse the privilege," he says. But one teacher at an alternative school with a high priority on home visits told me that the level of involvement in students' lives was "too much for me. I'm leaving to teach in a more strictly academic situation."

Especially if a school's advisory focus is more broadly defined, some school people balk at giving advice to young adults on personal issues. "Some things are rightly none of my business," one teacher told me. "They're the parental domain—they're not for me to know." In many cases, though, teachers must come to terms with the fact that if they do not care about the personal lives of their students, no one else will either. For schools in troubled communities like Central Falls, Rhode Island, this raises a particularly poignant point: the advisory relationship may be the only haven a student has. "There's a strong community feeling here among students and faculty," says Central Falls High School language teacher Robin Yates, "partly because of the contrasts between the school, the home, and the street. School is a

The Broken Code: Churchill's Dilemma at Coventry

At Bletchley, a tiny market town northwest of London, England, in November 1940, a terrible secret was learned. British code-breakers had managed to read German codes through an elaborate combination of stolen machines, Polish spies, interceptions, and brilliant and continuous decoding. The information gained in this way was called "Ultra"; it was gathered in the most careful and quiet way possible, and the British took great pains to keep the Germans from knowing that they had it. Obviously, if the Germans knew, they would simply adopt new codes, perhaps ones the British couldn't break.

During the Battle of Britain, when Hitler was sending waves of planes, first to terrorize London, then to destroy England's airfields, the code was somewhat helpful on early warning. Since the cities and airfields were obvious targets, the British could be expected to be ready with evacuation plans and fire engines. Other information, easily obtained by a modern nation, could be perceived in mid-flight; thus short-term, public adjustments could be made without creating suspicion.

But in November 1940 the cryptographers in Bletchley learned that Hitler was going to change his plans. Angrily responding to a bombing of Berlin which he had promised the German people could never occur, he decided suddenly to give up bombing strategic targets and instead bomb the nearby British provincial city of Coventry. The news was brought straight to Winston Churchill, the new prime minister, as one of the most terrible moral dilemmas of his career. If he acted on his knowledge, he would evacuate people and remove property, thus saving them; but he might also alert the Germans to the fact that he had "Ultra."

It was a clear choice between the present and the future, and the future was unknown. How many secrets might be learned if the Germans failed to suspect the British? Even if the Germans suspected, would they give up their code? Might they give up their code anyway? What about the lives that would be lost needlessly? What about the property, which included the historic Coventry cathedral?

The Americans, not yet in the war, were not told of Churchill's dilemma until the decision had been made. They might not have been much help. The U.S. Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson, didn't entirely believe in code-breaking; he believed that "gentlemen do not read each other's mail." And when Roosevelt learned of the situation, he said, "War is forcing us more and more to play God. I don't know what I should have done."

To Churchill, knowledge was desirable, even crucial, but it was also terrible. He dared not ignore it and he dared not act on it. What would you have done if you had been in his shoes?

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safe place for these kids, and they tend to like it and want to be here."

Once somebody does start to care, in whatever context, the results can be swift. Because 45 percent of Central Falls students come from homes where English is not spoken, the school's substantial bilingual program served as an important predecessor to its new advisory system. "I started using dialogue journals to develop literacy," says Yates. "But the kids kept using them to bring up very important issues. It got down to the most fundamental cultural questions about the meaning of schooling; what the role of teacher and student should be. And that gave rise to the essential question we'll be exploring as we start our Coalition team this year."

Ironically, however, a successful advisory effort can make a teacher's life harder, as more difficult students show up in class regularly. "Now that they're coming, you have to figure out what to do with them," Pasadena High's Judy Oksner says. "They are not only poor academically but they can present behavior problems."

Teachers, or Counselors?

Many teachers are reluctant to get involved in advisory programs because they fear they are unqualified to deal with serious problems that might arise. To address this, most schools encourage continual dialogue between guidance staff and teachers, emphasizing that the adviser's role is to spot problems, not necessarily to solve them, and training teachers to recognize signs of trouble. More serious behavioral or emotional problems, such as drug or alcohol use, are usually referred to guidance counselors or other professionals, although in some schools the adviser takes part in those meetings. The advisory relationship here can serve as a crucial early warning system, school people say. "All I had to read was a hint in her advisory journal that one student was

Terranova: An Extra-Territorial Tale

There was in the nineteenth century an Italian sailor called Terranova, who worked on an American ship, the *Emily*, chartered in Baltimore but also working out of Salem, Massachusetts. Terranova was swabbing the decks one day when the ship was at port in Canton, China, when a Chinese woman, standing on her little junk which was perched up against the ship, began to call to him. He was angry at the way the Chinese edged up against the ship; they had been asked not to, several times. He also obviously didn't understand what she was saying, and after a while her persistent calling to him began to get on his nerves. At some point, either by accident or perhaps otherwise, Terranova's jug, which was standing on the rail full of water to use in his swabbing, fell off the rail and landed on or near the woman below. She fell into the water, and, because she was stunned and also didn't know how to swim, she drowned.

A life had been lost; Chinese authorities believed that harmony would not return until something had been done to redress the balance. They therefore demanded that Terranova be given up to the Chinese authorities for determination of what his responsibility had been for her death, and also for possible punishment. The captain of the *Emily*, believing Terranova's violent protestations that the whole thing had been an accident, doubted the ability of the Chinese to give Terranova a fair trial as he understood it. He also felt that he ought, as captain, to act as if he were a father to Terranova.

Questions to ask:

- Who is to blame for the woman's death?
- Must the captain follow Chinese law in this case? If so, why?
- If the captain decides not to follow Chinese law, how can he justify his action to himself?
- What are the various options open to the captain? What are the explanations of each?
- What would be the most moral response on the captain's part?

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thinking about suicide," one teacher told me. "The safety net went out, and the student got counseling in time to help. At no time did I have to actually sit down with the student and counsel her about her suicide plans—I wouldn't have been prepared for that—but the system saved her."

Others balk at a quasi-guidance role for teachers for a more political reason: they worry that guidance staff will be cut with the change, or that their own work will unfairly be increased. The evidence is that advisories augment rather than substitute for the guidance counselor's job. But other administrative changes may be necessary to put an advisory system into

place. A group of perhaps 15 seems the ideal size, for instance; but this may be unworkable given the student-teacher ratio. To solve this some schools ask administrators, librarians, and other non-teaching staff to serve as advisers. Other schools may need waivers from teacher contract clauses or district regulations, especially when advisory groups count as a credit-bearing class.

Any advisory position can get sticky; those who do it best are comfortable working with opposing interests. "Being an advocate for a kid may put you in conflict with your peers," Rick Lear says. "It could be another teacher the student is having problems with."

The new role also can cause discomfort as teachers start thinking of themselves not solely as evaluative educators, but as coaches involved in both the intellectual and the emotional lives of their students. "This may lead to a decision to consider the evaluative relationship itself differently," notes Coalition senior researcher Patricia Wasley. "It ties right in to exhibitions, interestingly—the more you know about what a student is interested in, the more effectively you can coach her to demonstrate mastery. But this more holistic approach requires a significant leap for teachers."

But even teachers who oppose Essential School startup efforts often warm to the advisory concept, seeing it as a chance to improve the tone of a school troubled by apathy or social problems. At Central Falls, a schoolwide committee on advisories met separately from the Essential School steering committee; this year all teachers will serve as advisers, though only the seventh grade will start an Essential team. Similarly, Bellefonte High will introduce advisories schoolwide even as its Essential program begins with more modest numbers. "We saw the tone of our school going downhill in the last few

years," says Susan Robb, "and we needed to do something for all our kids. It wasn't necessarily the dropout rate; it was a poor attitude about being in school."

A Change in Tone

Teachers who have worked with advisories for years say their extra efforts pay off dramatically in the classroom. "I've seen drastic changes in students because someone cares about them as an adviser," says Mike Goldman of his years at Central Park East. "Attendance goes up; the kids work harder; study skills and academic performance improve." A good advisory system, he argues, sets a tone in which students want to come. "Small groups don't fall apart," Goldman says emphatically. "The advisory group breaks down the 'house' concept one more step—it sets up a family group within the larger house family."

As new advisory programs get going, even teachers who are not predisposed toward their new role report satisfying results. In Pasadena, says Judy Oksner, one 34-year teaching veteran who "always hated field trips or anything like that" began to have extraordinary success in advisory group activities. "At the end of the year he had the

entire group over to his home for a swimming party, where they presented a check to a local charity." The teachers who were most afraid of the adviser role sometimes end up as its biggest fans, the Coalition's Rick Lear concurs.

"Teachers tell me they know and understand the kids better; they start to see parents as allies," he says. "As they build better connections, their professional experience becomes richer."

At the graduation ceremony for Scarsdale Alternative High School each year, each senior is toasted in a brief speech by the student's adviser. "It may be teasing or warm, describing their contribution to the school or to the larger society—but for each student it's unique," Kent Lowry says. "For many students it is the highlight of their school career, to be publicly recognized for what is special about them. And it's only possible because we know them." Whether a school is small or large, whether its advisory program is loosely defined or carefully structured, that sense of personal recognition is at the heart of the advisory concept. "I know very few teachers who have worked as advisers for a couple of years and would willingly give it up," says Rick Lear. "It's the hook into kids." □



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