Linchpins or Lost Time: Creating Effective Advisories

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That advisories in secondary schools are fairly pervasive around the country may be one of the great unintended consequences of the Coalition of Essential Schools reform effort. While no CES Common Principle explicitly states that advisories should exist in schools, as Coalition Schools evolved, advisories became one of the logical ways for teachers to get to know their students well. However, despite their ubiquity, the effectiveness of advisories is problematic at many schools. In some, they have simply become a new name for "homeroom." In others, they are designated as "family groups" but simply serve as an administrative device for attendance and sending messages home. In the worst advisory scenarios, teachers and students experience the advisory as an additional burden on their time without any real value, and this is when the real unfulfilled promise of advisories has had tragic consequences.

With that in mind, I set out to question folks in a variety of Essential schools to find out how advisories work (or don't) in order to explore the idea that a more systematic and structured approach to developing advisory systems might help them create more effective schools, and hoping to develop some guidelines that may help Essential Schools (and others) create thriving, effective advisories.

In the spring of 2009, I sent an e-mail to 25 schools with a set of 10 questions about advisory programs. I received detailed responses from five schools that represent an interesting geographical cross-section: rural/suburban Massachusetts, upstate New York, rural Ohio, Los Angeles, and urban Rhode Island. Two schools are charters, one an alternative school, one a comprehensive high school, and one an independent school. Their Coalition membership dates back as far as 1988 and all are current, active CES schools.

The questions they responded to were:

> What is the purpose of advisories at your school? Is there a philosophy behind them or are they simply an administrative convenience?
> What is the structure of your advisory system? How many students per? How often do they meet and for what length of time, etc.?
> Is there a structured curriculum of any type? Is there a basic "system" with teachers given autonomy? Is there any guiding group or committee or supervisor "in charge" of advisories?
> What is the greatest benefit of advisories at your school?
> What are the greatest challenges associated with advisories at your school?
> How would you characterize students' views of advisories at your school?
> How would you characterize teachers' views of advisories at your school?
> How would you characterize the community's/parents' view of advisories at your school?
> Is there a clear connection between advisories and membership in the Coalition of Essential Schools at your school? (That is, does belonging to CES have a connection to the creation/existence of advisories at your school?)

Please feel free to add any comments or remarks that you think would be important to note about advisories at your school.

The responses to these questions were interesting and informative. In some cases, as you will see, there was great consistency and in others, provocative divergence. Most significant is that all the responding schools clearly have a commitment to advisories as an essential component of the school culture and experience for their students. None of these schools is considering eliminating advisories and all see advisories as a value-added dimension of their institution. Based on this, I believe we can develop some

guidelines for how to design and develop advisory programs based on their experiences. By looking at the responses to each question, then, we can begin to piece together advisory program "best practices."

What is the purpose of advisories at your school? Is there a philosophy behind them or are they simply an administrative convenience?
The response to this question included:

Counseling
Academic advising and monitoring
Community building
Social/peer identity development
Social/group skills interaction
Consciousness of alternative education and CES principles
Recreational activities
All-school meetings and "check in"
Discussion and conflict resolution
Spring trip fundraising

Blackstone Academy Charter School uses advisories to "touch base" and have one adult connected to students in significant ways; they use the advisory for academic check-in, school issues, and conflict resolution. Federal Hocking High School said advisories served academic/social/emotional functions that contribute to academic coaching and counseling. Wildwood School pointed to advisories' value for academic/social/emotional support. Parker Charter Essential School noted that advisors served as advocates for students while creating peer networks and providing academic advising, community conversations, community service, and recreation.

At all of these schools, advisories are focused on the students. These schools have made a concerted effort to connect the teachers/adults with their students in more than a superficial way. There is a clear commitment in these schools to create a culture that gives students a voice and encourages teachers to listen and counsel.

What is the structure of your advisory system? How many students per? How often do they meet and for what length of time, etc.?
The responses here were very consistent. At Lehman Alternative Community School, 10 to 14 students meet two times a week for 40 minutes; at Blackstone, 10 to 12 students meet 35 minutes daily; at Federal Hocking, advisories meet 10 minutes three days a week with a 60 minute meeting one day and 35 minutes another; Wildwood's met with 15 students every day for 45 minutes; and Parker's met with 12 students every day for 15 minutes each morning and afternoon and one hour one day a week with additional in-school and after-school time.

The clear lesson here is that advisories require a commitment of TIME. In all these schools, the culture and schedules have been designed around advisories—they are not an add-on or a convenience. They are seen as essential to the life and culture of the school.

Is there a structured curriculum of any type? Is there a basic "system" with teachers given autonomy? Is there any guiding group or committee or supervisor "in charge" of advisories?
At Lehman Alternative Community School, the teachers are liaisons to the families. They also monitor students' academic progress and work. They have autonomy to facilitate their advisories in ways that they choose. Blackstone Academy Charter School has a "matrix" of responsibilities that include doing Career Inventories, guiding portfolio development, working with mixed-grade combinations, and working individually with students. At Federal Hocking High School, each grade level has a program the principal directs. Wildwood School supports advisors with team teacher meetings led by school counselors that consider school themes such as multiculturalism, leadership, current events, and conflict resolution. These meetings also support development of exhibitions. Parker Charter Essential School's advisories feature daily "Connections/Reflections," counseling about personal learning plans, and individual consultation between students and advisors.

In classic Coalition fashion, no two schools are the same. However, many of our schools share common

characteristics—in this case, that the students are the focus of advisories. All of these advisory systems benefit from ways their schools create an environment designed to benefit the students and their development.

What is the greatest benefit of advisories at your school?
The responses here were fairly consistent. At Lehman: "Knowing students and parents well, being 'advocates.' " At Blackstone: "Students have a 'safe haven,' a non-threatening place to touch base with students. At Federal Hocking: "A place to keep track of kids." At Wildwood: "The hub of all learning and reflection. It boosts academic success, it provides a connection to adult mentors, it encapsulates to "tone of decency and trust,' and new students learn the school culture. It provides pro-active communication with parents and empowers students." At Parker: "It creates relationships between Advisors and Advisees . . . while promoting school culture, teaching students how to work in groups and serves as the backbone of the community."

Clearly, advisories are the main source of school culture in these institutions, creating positive relationships between teachers, students, and parents while providing open avenues for communication in every direction.

What are the greatest challenges associated with advisories at your school?
This question provided the most consistent response. First and foremost, of course, was time! Finding or creating time to make advisories work is the greatest challenge for any school. What was also mentioned, and equally challenging, was the work of preparing teachers to be advisors, an incredibly important component to developing successful advisory programs. Overseeing academic advising and college prep work, keeping the "tool kit" fresh for teachers and balancing the teacher load regarding teaching and advising were other items mentioned. Underlying the issues of sufficient time and adequate advisor preparation, I believe, are the needs for staff buy-in, careful, long-term planning, and decisive leadership. Advisories do not work when they are mandated and solely top-down. But bottom-up initiatives present an array of challenges, too: they require time, planning, and administrative support. If they are to succeed, advisories are not something that should be taken lightly or treated cavalierly.

How would you characterize students' views of advisories at your school?
The response to this question consistently centered on the effectiveness of the advisory. At Lehman, advisories are the "heart" of the school. Elsewhere, students' views are colored by to the quality of the advisor. Wildwood students "cherish advisory," and Parker shared that the quality of advising leads students to take responsibility for their own learning. These observations indicate that when advisories run well, they have a strong positive impact on students' experiences.

What is striking here is that so much depends on the quality of the advising that comes from by the educators serving as advisors. If schools can create systems of professional development that genuinely prepare teachers to be effective advisors, the school culture will flourish. If not, advisories will be problematic.

How would you characterize teachers' views of advisories at your school?
The responses to this question were strikingly similar from school to school. In one case, teachers saw advisories as "essential but challenging, time consuming [but] the best part of the job." Another response was that the teachers "most greatly value the relationships and time with students—but struggle to find time to plan advisories well." Federal Hocking High School's response was direct: "[Teachers] love it. . . . see it as crucial to the overall mission of the school . . . would never change it." Similarly, the word from Wildwood was that advising was "inextricably connected to being a good teacher." The Parker teachers "care strongly and value the time (with students) and particularly value being an Advisor to students they teach in class."

What's important to note from the responses, I think, are the ways the role of advisor is seen as an important facet of being an effective teacher at these schools. It is seen not as a burden or "add-on" but as an essential component of the teaching and learning community. Advisory systems that work require this level of commitment and buy-in from the teaching staff.

How would you characterize the community's/parents' view of advisories at your school?
This question brought an interesting range of responses, pointing out again how no two schools are alike. At Lehman, the community/parent view was that advisories were "crucial," providing parent meetings at the

beginning, middle, and end of the school year as well as a venue for sending out quarterly reports. Blackstone parents, by comparison, seem "intrigued," particularly "with having one teacher to connect with." Their overall reaction is that parents "like the concept." On the far end of the spectrum, Federal Hocking High School reported that it "didn't know" what the community or parent take on the advisories might be. Wildwood parents are "appreciative . . . appreciative of conferences (in particular)." Parker parents "value Advisory" and are "reassured knowing the Advisor is paying close attention" to their students.

Schools shape advisories based on their individual cultures and the engagement with the community and parents can run the entire spectrum from high participation to no contact. What's crucial, it seems, is that the advisory system works for the students and teachers at the school and is truly a value-added component to the academic, social, and emotional life of the school.

Is there a clear connection between advisories and membership in the Coalition of Essential Schools at your school? (That is, does belonging to CES have a connection to the creation/existence of advisories at your school?)

I asked this question to get some kind of historical perspective on the ways advisories evolved in various schools and to find out how "consciously" advisories were connected to CES principles. Here the responses were extremely similar and emphasized the great extent to which advisories have become embedded in CES culture.

The Lehman Alternative Community School began before the Coalition was created, and their advisories were in full swing when they joined CES in 1987. Since joining, however, there has been a clear connection between their advisories and the Common Principles that state, "Teaching and learning should be personalized to the maximum feasible extent) and "The tone of the school should explicitly and self-consciously stress values of unanxious expectations and of decency." Blackstone Academy joined CES in the early 21st century and "assumed from the get-go [that] as a CES school" advisories would be an integral part of their design. Federal Hocking sees advisories as central to "living out the principle of being a small community" and Wildwood believes the "tone of decency" principle "gets at the heart of advising and the kind of school culture we want to exist." The Parker School sees their advisories as "central to Parker's design, grounded in CES principles."

At least at these schools and likely at many more, advisories are deeply connected to the Common Principles, particularly those that address personalization and community culture. In all cases, there seemed to be an assumption that CES principles are more consciously implemented when advisories are an integral part of the school and curriculum design.

Please feel free to add any comments or remarks that you think would be important to note about advisories at your school.

The comments offered in response to this question were few but significant. Having advisories was seen as a great vehicle for professional development for the staff—they generated ideas and provided resources across grade levels and disciplines. Additionally, advisories seemed to provide a natural setting for reflection and skill building by teachers. There was also a comment that having a supportive principal and a "point person" guiding the advisory program helped ensure success. While advisories are clearly intended to benefit the growth of students in schools, this survey also revealed how much they contribute to the professional growth of the teachers and administrators who commit to creating effective advisories.

Key Points in Designing and Implementing Advisories

While this is far from an in-depth study of the design and implementation of advisory systems, there are five significant insights we can garner from the responses of these five vastly different schools that share the commonality of benefitting from successful advisories.

First, advisories require time. Time, of course, is the great villain for everyone and everything in schools, and in the case of advisories, there are some definite, particular, and acute issues. Aside from the time that is allotted to advisories during the school day and week, significant time needs to be spent planning any proposed advisory system. Even with extensive, lengthy, careful planning, the first year will be extremely difficult as teachers learn the ropes and students adjust to something new. Without careful planning—which requires serious investments of time by teachers and administrators before an advisory system sees the light of day—there is almost no way a successful advisory program can be introduced.

Second, advisories should have a clear focus. Following the *Understanding by Design* model (authored by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe) of planning backwards from outcomes, anyone or any team planning an advisory program should be very clear about what they expect advisories to be in their school culture. Are there particular CES Common Principles that advisories will focus on? Are there academic or community service goals educators would like to see students achieve that advisories would help with? Without a clear target for what advisories are going to be, the program will be in trouble from the start.

The third insight is the need for leadership and organization. Important decisions about the ways advisories will be led that determine the frequency and focus of teacher meetings, the development of teams, grade level or cross-grade level coordination, and countless other details should be clearly established from the start. Is the principal in charge? Is there a lead teacher? A team to direct the curriculum? Will we have "town meetings" regularly? These are just some aspects of the initial brainstorming that needs to go into the planning of an advisory system. Certainly these components will change and evolve as the system gets up and running, but if a leadership and organizational structure is not in place from day one, the going will be very rough.

The fourth key factor is implementation. In what ways will advisories be introduced to students and the community? What is the implementation plan for the early going? Will there be community-building activities that are school-wide or that happen across grade levels? Will there be events that introduce the system to the parents and community? How will teachers check in with each other about their progress or problems with advisory? Again, these are just some of the questions that need to be considered before advisories are started. Considering what the "worst case scenarios" might be and how they will be dealt with, planning scheduled meeting times and conferences with other teachers and parents—all of this has to go into the initial planning stages when designing Advisories if there is to be any hope for success over the long-term.

Finally, plans to create an advisory system must consider the ways it will be sustained over time. One of the early considerations will need to be about teacher turnover. What happens when an advisor leaves? How will new teachers— and new students—be brought up to speed to sustain the success of the advisories? What kinds of activities and "traditions" does a school community want to build in from the beginning that will create a distinct identity for advisories as an integral part of the school that will sustain them over time? All the schools discussed here have found ways to answer these questions and others that arise over time. While we cannot anticipate every twist and turn that will occur along the way, the early planning must consider the long-range goals and the structures and systems that will sustain the energy and effectiveness of advisories over time. How often will we review what we are doing and reflect on it? How will that be built into the structure of the system?

There it is: time, staff development, leadership and organization, implementation, and sustainability are the major factors to consider when planning the creation and development of an effective advisory system. I greatly appreciate the information that Lehmann, Blackstone, Federal Hocking, Wildwood, and Parker provided to help develop these ideas and hope that other schools can benefit from their success as the Coalition continues to move into the future providing students, teachers, parents, and communities with exceptional schools that use advisories to promote the CES Common Principles. Advisories have a unique ability to not only support the Common Principles, but also to provide the vehicle to do so.

Schools participating in Bil Johnson's advisories survey were:
Blackstone Academy Charter School, Pawtucket, Rhode Island
Federal Hocking High School, Stewart, Ohio
Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School, Devens, Massachusetts
Lehman Alternative Community School, Ithaca, New York
Wildwood School, Los Angeles, California
Please see *Go to the Source* on page 48 for more information about these schools as well as other schools and organizations featured in this issue of *Horace*.

Horace 20.4, "Advisories in Essential Schools," and *Horace* 7.1, "Are Advisory Groups 'Essential'? What They

Do, How They Work?" provide additional information on the ways that advisories work to support the mission of Essential schools.

Visit www.essentialschools.org to read these issues and explore additional related resources.

Bil Johnson started substitute teaching in 1971. His association with the Coalition of Essential Schools began in 1987 and continued in multiple ways in the following years. Johnson was a co-founder the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in 1994; he co-wrote Parker's charter and served as the Lead Teacher in Arts/Humanities when the school opened in 1995-96. Johnson returned to Brown University as a Senior Lecturer and the Director of Social Studies/History Education in the Education Department in 1996-97. In 2001, Johnson was the Founding President of the Board of Directors for Blackstone Academy Charter School in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Johnson moved to the teacher education program at Yale University in 2007. In 2008, he taught at Essex Street Academy, an Essential school on the Lower East Side of NYC. Currently, Johnson teaches history at the Urban Assembly School for Design and Construction on West 50th Street in New York City. Johnson wrote the *The Performance Assessment Handbook*, featuring examples of work from teachers in CES schools, and *The Student Centered Classroom Handbook*, which offers examples of Coalition principles in action in the classroom.

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