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Standards of

Mind and Heart

CREATING THE GOOD HIGH SCHOOL

PEGGY SILVA

ROBERT A. MACKIN

Foreword by Tony Wagner

TEACHERS
COLLEGE
PRESS

Teachers College, Columbia University
New York and London

We strive to give our students the academic skills they will need to succeed in their future, while also strengthening the personal bonds between adolescents and adults. Greatly influenced by Ted Sizer's work and the Common Principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools, we believed that the presence of caring adults in students' lives would lead to greater success for each child. We knew, therefore, that we had to provide the time and opportunity to get to know our students well. Our daily Advisory Program brings together ten students and one adult each day, to ensure that each child in our school has an adult advocate. This advocacy role takes on many forms over the 4 years of high school. Ninth-grade advisers focus attention on transition issues and breaking down social stereotypes, tenth-grade advisers mentor the Division One Exhibition (see Chapter 4), eleventh-grade advisers help students map out their postsecondary plans, and twelfth-grade advisers monitor student progress in their Senior Project (see Chapter 4).

The Purpose of Advisory

Our Program of Studies states that Advisory is a daily meeting with 10 to 12 students and a staff adviser who provides academic and personal support and helps foster communication skills, team building, trust, and individual self-esteem. The adviser becomes a primary contact person with parents, students, and teachers. Successful completion of 4 years of Advisory is required for graduation. Advisories meet each day for 25 minutes, before or after lunch.

There is more to Advisory than this definition provides. First and foremost, our Advisory Program is the result of our conscious and deliberate decision to ensure that each child in our school has an adult advocate. Our Mission Statement calls upon us "to challenge and expand the comfortable limits of thought, tolerance, and performance." Advisory is the place where much of that happens, where the Mission Statement is implemented on a daily basis. Guidance counselor Alan Gordon, who played a major role in the implementation of our Advisory Program, offers these thoughts:

I listened carefully to Cleve Penberthy, our first dean of students, describe how at most schools students arrive every morning and drop off their hearts, bodies, and souls outside the front door. Their heads come into school for about 7 hours and then rejoin the other parts of themselves outside, at the end of the day. Cleve intended that at Souhegan we would do things differently; whole persons would enter our school to engage in the business of learning every day.

ADVISORY

When Souhegan first opened in 1992, the focus on personalization was not entirely popular. Amid the publicity and political hoopla surrounding the Goals 2000 reform efforts started in the early 1990s, the whole idea of personalization of high schools had taken on an almost negative connotation. Conservative groups in many communities around the country attempted to convince both parents and educators that concepts such as self-esteem or human tolerance should not be the province of schools.

In our view, such efforts to downplay the human side of schooling were missing the mark. In spite of the reticence—and in some cases the outright hostility of certain parents and community members—we consciously strove to create a collaborative community. While the voices of our adversaries were loud ones, we were also being told by corporate and business leaders that they wanted employees who were able to work in teams, to communicate effectively, to exhibit strong personal and interpersonal skills, to be adaptable to change, and to know *how* to learn. These were viewed as the essential attributes for the new corporate culture and ultimately for competing globally in the 21st century.

With that in mind, Souhegan, like many schools today, took on a more holistic mission than that suggested by "back-to-basics" reform advocates. It is a mission that called for basic proficiency in a broad range of personal and interpersonal skills in addition to the basic academic learning proficiencies we all recognize are required. And it is a mission that can best be accomplished within a humane and personalized setting.

Personalization became one of a very few essential primary building blocks on which Souhegan High School was constructed.

When we began our work together in August of 1992, our orientation activities underscored many of the tasks essential to creating a strong Advisory Program. We needed to establish a supportive professional community. We needed to create a place where a heterogeneous group of adults and young people would feel comfortable enough to engage in the business of learning.

We needed to involve ourselves in team-building activities that would quickly form us into closely knit faculty. We needed to discover ways in which to integrate the Mission Statement into our daily school lives. These goals were identical to those that advisers face on entering their new Advisories every year.

The skills involved in running a good Advisory are the very same that are involved in teaching a good class. They can be taught. Advisers need to feel comfortable interacting informally with students. They need to know how to ask open-ended questions. They need to know how to facilitate a good discussion. They need to learn debriefing skills. The application of debriefing skills provides the opportunity for a group to examine its own progress. It jump-starts the group process on a regular basis. When we examine how we are doing as a group, we begin to share responsibility for the development of that group. Ownership of the group can begin to be shared among advisees and advisers.

One important aspect of Advisory is crisis intervention. Following a fatal car accident involving students at my daughter's school, an announcement was made at the end of the day; kids were sent home in tears with no school-based adult to talk to. We need to ensure that nothing like this ever happens at Souhegan High School. Here, in the event of a crisis, students and staff go immediately to Advisory to hear or read a common announcement. We take time out to react in a safe, comfortable setting. We identify students who might be at risk due to the nature of the news we have just heard. We believe that the event, and what can be learned from it, is so important that giving time and attention to it supersedes any preplanned classroom curriculum.

We often use metaphors to describe Advisory to parents. We sometimes think of Advisory as a carpool, where kids allow adults to overhear their casual conversation. Occasionally, the driver can interject a point of view or change the focus of the conversation, but the driver does not "own" the carpool. Advisory can also parallel a family dinner table, where con-

versations can vary from the provocative to the "pass the salt" variety. It is the aggregate of all those dinners that forms the story of the family. And sometimes, Advisory mimics life in a fire station—a lot of time is spent on maintenance, but when a fire breaks out, the engine is ready to respond.

Student Views. Students understand the purpose of Advisory and are eager to share their views. More than 400 students responded within 2 days to our survey of their thoughts on the purpose of Advisory. These responses are typical of those received:

Molly Blessing ('00): Advisory "gives kids and teachers time to get together to support each other's ideas and thoughts."

Nick Neveritsky ('02): "Advisory is about camaraderie. That, and pizza, you can't forget about pizza. Advisory means a great deal to me. . . . It has given me the opportunity to get to know my classmates, teachers, and myself."

Emily Bielagus ('02): "It's hard to go unnoticed in an environment where every student's feelings are considered and discussed."

Ben Meade ('02): "The meaning of Advisory is to have a person-to-person relationship, not a student-to-faculty relationship."

Josh Robinson ('02): "When I moved to Amherst at the start of ninth grade, for a fellow member of my Advisory to say hello to me in the halls . . . was a good feeling . . . it was a way to meet people."

Jaime Lefkowitz ('02): "Advisory offers a break from school work to talk and share opinions. Sometimes Advisory brings out qualities in people who might otherwise be in shadow. This lets us gain respect for each other, to realize our differences, and most of all, to respect them."

All of the respondents used similar words to convey the meaning of Advisory: comfort, support, relaxed setting, bonding, security, trust, reflection, a sense of belonging.

Special relationships with adult advisers matter to kids. Jaimie Harrow ('03) appreciates that "there is always a teacher looking after the welfare of a student." Judson Irish ('03) knows that "if someone does mess up, then the adviser is always there to help." Junior Chris Vassallo believes that "if Columbine could not be prevented, it could definitely be predicted. Advisers seem to get to know their kids fairly well, and if something was disturbing one of them, they would be able to tell." Samantha Allen ('02) credits her adviser with "always pushing me to do better in classes. She wants me to get all that I can out of the classes I take, and it's important to have an adult in school backing and pushing you all the way." One student remembers the day we learned about the death of a classmate. Her

adviser "had been crying for quite some time. Our whole Advisory sat on the floor in the hall and talked about what had happened. I don't think that there was a dry eye that day."

Students understand the collegial nature of Advisory. Dan Cronin ('98) offered to facilitate his ninth-grade Advisory through a difficult conflict they were experiencing. John MacDonald ('02) speaks of "creating bonds that strengthen the community. Advisory matters to me, every day in Advisory matters to me." Senior Christopher Wason "likes to sit around and share stories. It is a very special thing when an Advisory works. It needs to have all the elements to work, and it needs to be a group effort."

Faculty Views. The two teachers who work with a student with autism find that Advisory "gives an excellent opportunity for this student to interact with peers in a casual environment and also for other students to learn more about autism."

Theater teacher Steve Hodgman found the first couple of years of Advisory difficult:

As a committed optimist, I wanted all students to get along all of the time. That hadn't happened, of course. But then, one group just clicked. They hugged a lot, brought food a lot, even organized projects at the local soup kitchen. We decided to travel to New York City together, staying at an apartment owned by a relative of one of my advisees. I brought my family along, and everybody took turns looking after my kids.

The remarkable thing is that this group was no different from any other group I had had; they were a combination of overachievers, underachievers, athletes, actors—they just liked each other's company.

Art teacher Martha Rives learned that her sense of Advisory identity relates to the students' role in setting the tone. She finds that "Kids invest in Advisory as a place where they learn about problem solving and personal responsibility if they tie themselves to standards of behavior and participation that they design with their Adviser."

After attending a weekend training session for a Peer Outreach program, Chip Bailey found a link to his work with his Advisory. "I understood more clearly the forces in the lives of students. I accepted my advisees for who they were, was honest with them, and confronted them when needed."

For Advisory to function well, we all search for ways to form a cohesive bond with widely diverse students. As a way of underscoring the need

for participation, Kris Gallo asked her first Advisory to design an effort rubric. When she mentioned the value of participating in discussion, Carl pointed out that not talking did not mean not listening. He said that every group needs people who will listen. "I do not tune out," he said, "I listen."

Outcomes

We believe in the cumulative effect of creating a caring community. We reinforce our beliefs every single day in a dedicated period of time devoted to knowing a small group of individuals well. We know that this makes a difference in students' lives.

Sometimes, however, we believe in Advisory as an ideal, not as the place we most want to be on a particular day. Sometimes teachers groan as they leave the lunch table, hoping that a fire drill might cancel Advisory for the day. We whine and drag our feet, and, of course, sometimes our students whine as well: "Why can't we go outside/stay inside? . . . Why do we always/never play games? . . . I don't want to have an academic day. . . . Why do you always nag me about _____ . . . How come we never/always do what so-and-so does in his Advisory? . . . I gotta go find somebody. . . . I'm bored. . . . This Advisory is boring. . . . We never do anything. . . . How come we always gotta talk? . . . Please can I go ask somebody something—I'll only be a minute, I swear. . . . It's so lame. . . . Nobody ever wants to do what I want. . . . Why do we always have to sit in a circle?"

Whining about Advisory is one of those "cheesy-bonding" experiences that one graduate urged us to continue. Her phrase became part of the Souhegan vocabulary.

The cheesy bonding in Advisory forces interaction between every member of every social, academic, and athletic clique in the school. Every day for 25 minutes, Metallica meets Jewel, Marilyn Manson meets N Sync, and even if the sole thing that happens during that 25 minutes is that the most popular student in the tenth grade plays Pictionary with the most disenfranchised student in the tenth grade, that is a good and worthy investment of time. There is much to separate our children in their worlds; Advisory promotes a connection beyond their usual and customary definition of themselves. That connection is vital in the development of a democratic society; it is as worthy as any academic endeavor in any classroom.

Risky business, this stuff. In order for Advisory to make a difference, we need to respect each other's vulnerability and volatility, and that requires constant attention. We ask students to honor the confidential nature of Advisory, not to exclude any stakeholders in a child's safety and well-being, but to ensure that conversations in Advisory do not continue as gossip in the hallway. Alan Gordon believes:

It is important to note that we adults do not create or promote these conversations. They take place in the bathrooms, hallways, and parking lots all the time. Kids talk about parties, about drinking too much, about dieting, about sleeping together, about drugs, about pregnancy, about Web sites that produce term papers, about cheating on a physics midterm, about their church youth groups, about how to apply to college, about finding a job, about whether to get a tattoo. If we are successful and fortunate, kids will trust us enough to bring those conversations into Advisory. That gives us an opportunity to inject into the conversation timely thoughts and suggestions and to create teachable moments. We do not purposely invade the private space of students and their families. Advisers are not trained psychologists or counselors; they are merely good listeners. If we create a secure safety net for students' feelings, they will often share those feelings and raw emotions with us. And thank God they do.

Raw emotions vary, of course, in an adolescent population. Confidentiality allowed one ninth-grader, Josh, to talk about the crush he had on a girl he had met at his orthodontist's office. He wanted to find out more about her, and maybe even call her, but he didn't know how to proceed. A couple of kids role-played conversations with Josh, and then he practiced what he would say to her when he did call. Everybody insisted that Josh report back to the Advisory, surrounding that event with gentle laughter. Josh's privacy was maintained because nobody talked about his dilemma outside of Advisory.

Lisa used her ninth-grade Advisory to vent about how unfair her mother was about a curfew on prom night. Her adviser tried to get her to see that her mother was concerned for her safety as a 14-year-old in the company of 18- and 19-year-olds. She was furious, because "everybody knows you don't do 'IT' until sophomore year!" Other kids in the Advisory nodded their heads, agreeing with that informal commandment about losing one's virginity. The stunned adviser used that conversation to begin a sustained discussion of sexual mores. The adviser maintained Lisa's confidentiality but shared the outline of the ensuing discussion with other advisers and the school nurse as an opportunity to open communication with other Advisories.

A student in Jess Tremblay's Advisory routinely asked her to "tell me something good about myself; I need to hear it right now." A troubled boy, silent and disengaged in class, he eventually began to connect with others in his Advisory when he realized that some of them also had a lot of difficulty with some coursework. He began to participate, allowing his adviser

to nag him about completing assignments. He told her not to stop because he needed the help, even though she drove him crazy. The boy was surprised by the support he received in this small circle of his day.

Support for Advisers

Advisory raises many questions for which there are no right answers. What happens if a student confides that he has no faith in one of his teachers? How does an Advisory handle the information that an advisee's friend is vomiting every day after lunch? Is it okay for an adviser to share her own experience about a date rape when an advisee opens that topic for discussion? How can we engage in a conversation about drinking that goes beyond preaching to a bored audience? What do we do when asked about our own drinking? Who can help change the dynamics of a troubled group? How do we include a strange new member? How do we deal with two subgroups that have developed? What if the group doesn't want to do anything at all?

We bring those questions to grade-level Advisory meetings, facilitated by Alan Gordon. At best, these meetings serve as a sort of adult Advisory, providing an opportunity for us to support one another, offer suggestions, and reassure one another that we are not alone. We raise difficult questions to gain support for our individual experiences. We discuss common grade-level themes and curriculum. We search for solutions for the truly wrenching topics of destructive behaviors that some of our students wrestle with. We talk; we talk constantly. Without sustained time to talk and reflect on our work in this powerful arena, Advisory would fail; powerful connections require powerful investments.

The training we receive helps us to understand that there are three major categories that students might bring to us, as advisers or teachers:

- *Problems* are the issues of everyday adolescence: relationships, academic difficulties, uncertainty about future plans, and so forth.
- *Crises* are issues on which we need to consult with each other or a counselor: divorce, eating disorders, substance abuse, death and dying, pregnancy, and so forth.
- *Emergencies* require an immediate referral to the student's counselor: threats of suicide or homicide, abuse, rape, and so forth.

Advisers and teachers consult with our counseling staff for help with difficult issues.

The composition of any single group impacts the nature of that Advisory, according to Alan Gordon:

The challenge thus becomes the identification of those features all Advisories share in common. It is not curriculum, because the curriculum of Advisory is really the experiences, interests, values, skills, hops, and fears of all the individual members. It boils down to skills and process. Students learn the skills and develop the ability to function in a heterogeneous group of their peers. They learn how to listen, facilitate, lead, cooperate, care, and support. Most of this learning occurs indirectly during the meals, games, and discussions that take place. Occasionally, effective debriefing makes that learning more directly evident. We draw upon that learning on a daily basis in the classroom and much less frequently during a crisis.

The best advisers are the best teachers. The best advisers are the people who are able to be natural and comfortable with a group of kids, individuals who can ask an open-ended question and facilitate a discussion, and train their kids to do that.

Alan is "afraid that the more we 'curricularize' Advisory, the more we compromise the fragile nature of that safety net." Rich Wallace (Wally) shares this struggle:

As an adviser, I have been able to refer, advocate, and, most importantly, intervene. Being able to listen is the most important skill we can employ as an adviser. We need to approach Advisory as a time when the adviser may be the only adult in a student's life who has the time to listen.

Defining his role as adviser as analogous to that of "uncle," Wally addresses our fundamental values when he states that "Advisory does not just give us a human face but makes us a caring, compassionate community." We have many examples of the compassionate community that develops through the deliberate nature of Advisory. Each small group seeks commonality. They connect as human beings by hanging out with each other, playing games, walking to the general store, going out for pizza, arguing, studying, shooting hoops, or sharing mutual boredom. It is a delicate dance.

Athletic director Bill Dod points to our "strong philosophy of caring" as helping his advisees to plan a trip to a local restaurant. His students took the responsibility of teaching a student with very special needs how to behave appropriately in a restaurant.

When faced with the death of a student in his Advisory, Ted Hall recognized the mutual support his group demonstrated. "They made sure that

I did not travel by myself to the cemetery. They made a point of ensuring that I was not the sole caretaker of our group."

We all monitor student academic progress and serve as a liaison for our advisees with their teachers and parents. Beyond that, Advisory is as different as each adviser in the building.

We use what we know. Kierstan Harrow ('98) remembers that Phil Estabrook "brought in cases from his graduate ethics class for us to debate. We also attempted to build a toboggan; we did everything to get the wood ready to steam, and Phil built the steam box. The wood snapped before it was done steaming, so that was sad, but we had such a good time." Brian and Amy McGuigan taught their advisees to merengue and swing dance before the prom. Advisories have also made gingerbread houses together and provided holiday gifts and meals to area charities.

Not every teacher finds comfort daily in Advisory. Some want a daily activity that someone else has designed. According to Alan Gordon, "I believe that comes back to the whole notion that Advisory is not about curriculum, it is about the skill of engaging students in a nonthreatening way." And although we can point to the goals of each grade level in Advisory, its strength is often invisible to the eye. Bill Dod notes that "Advisory is easy to attack because there aren't quantitative ways to measure the value. You can't give a quiz or a test." It is a place, for Nick Rowe, a veteran of more than 25 years in a classroom, to "round out the rough places of my relationships with kids, serving to remind me that they are people, not just students. I need to be reminded that there is more to being a student than rank in class, grades, and scholarship—there is personhood." Kris Gallo believes:

There shouldn't be school without Advisory. Kids can't fall through the cracks when one adult is in charge of fishing them out of whatever puddle they have just fallen into. I wonder if the tragedy of Columbine would have happened if each of those boys had had an adviser, someone who knew him well?

We honor Advisory's place in our school's life in our graduation ceremonies. Seniors march onto the field with their Advisory, sit together, and receive their diplomas from their adviser, amid many hugs and handshakes.

Whether it serves as triage or celebration, as support or fellowship, Advisory, in Alan Gordon's eyes, is "the most significant way in which we evidence our commitment to personalization. It is the only class that all students take. It is the only class that nearly all our adults teach. Nothing we do here is more student-centered. Nothing we do here is more important."