

Designing Your School's Advisory Program

This section highlights some of the choices that administrators and advisory coordinators should consider carefully when designing and launching their advisory program. These choices include

- where and how advisory fits into your master schedule,
- where advisory groups will meet,
- who on the staff will serve as advisors,
- how you will group students into advisories,
- how you will structure the advisory program around other programs, such as assemblies and class meetings, and
- who will oversee the advisory program, provide professional development, and tailor the activities to fit the mission of your advisory program and needs of your student body.

For more guidance about launching an advisory program at your school, we recommend *The Advisory Guide: Designing and Implementing Successful Advisory Programs in Secondary Schools* by Rachel Poliner and Carol Miller Lieber. In addition to chapters about professional development and resources for your advisors, many of the points outlined below are explained by Poliner and Lieber in greater depth in this excellent resource for administrators and advisors alike.

Placing Advisory in the Master Schedule

How much time you need for advisory each week depends on your goals for advisory and how many advisees are in each group. Larger groups and more goals require more advisory meetings built into the master schedule. No matter the goals, you need frequent enough meeting times to have a sense of continuity in order for groups to develop strong relationships and interact with activities in meaningful ways, for advisors to provide support and feedback, and for advisees to have time for self-assessment, goal-setting, and reflection.

Scheduling advisory at the beginning or the end of the day can increase skipping, especially in high schools. Scheduling advisory in the middle of the day sends the message that advisory is as important as academic classes. Athletes (and teacher/coaches) leaving campus early for games and students arriving late to school will be

less apt to miss meetings. In contrast to many high schools, some middle schools choose the beginning or the end of the day for advisory to help advisees get settled and prepare for the day, check in on their homework routine, and address topics for the day, week, or month.

If you are using the same period in the master schedule for advisory as you are for assemblies, grade-level meetings, and/or tutorial or study halls, it is important to map out where in the master calendar each meeting falls so you know approximately how many periods you can devote to advisory versus other kinds of meetings and school-wide events. From there, you can start to plan the advisory activities for the first six weeks of the year (see **Sample Advisory Meeting Maps for the Opening Weeks** on page 19). You can set aside meetings for *Community Matters: A Facing History and Ourselves Approach to Advisory*, as well as intersperse other activities that address personal, social, and academic goal-setting, mini-conferences to review grade reports, and other topics like study and time-management skills.

Coordinating and Sustaining the Advisory Program

Your academic departments likely have department heads and/or district curriculum directors. Your teaching teams likely have lead teachers. Your school has adult leaders for clubs and sports. Advisory, too, needs one or more staff members to take the lead. Most successful advisory programs have a coordinator or committee who are given the role as part of their school job or are paid a stipend as they would be if they were coaching a team or teaching an extra class. The coordinator or co-coordinators plan and conduct all-staff advisory professional development throughout the year, help administrators schedule advisory into the master calendar, assign advisees to advisors, oversee the scope and sequence of the activities and communicate the information to advisors, order supplies, identify rooms, coach struggling advisors, arrange the logistics for special project days, and assess effectiveness and improvement needs.

Deciding Who Will Serve as an Advisor

When launching an advisory program, we recommend involving all members of the faculty and professional staff. Doing so sends a message that all adults in the school care about the students. It gives all adults a common role in the school community, making professional development about advisory-related topics relevant to everyone. It also allows you to have smaller groups. Certain adults might be co-advisors, such as the principal (so they can tend to emergencies when necessary) and novice teachers (so they can share the responsibility as they acclimate to their teaching load).

Establishing Advisory Meeting Spaces

Since advisory is about the young people in the group, it is important to have the group size be as small as possible while still having workable meeting spaces. There are often more adults in school than there are good spaces for advisory groups to meet, so it doesn't always work to take the number of students and divide it by the number of adults. The administrator or advisory coordinator should walk the building and create a map of the suitable meeting spaces. Some unusual spaces can work well, such as conference rooms, backstage, or large offices. Some classrooms are difficult to make work, like computer or science labs, unless there is a way to arrange the space for circle discussions and for paired and small-group activities. Certain areas of the library might feel contained and private enough. The cafeteria and gym, however, are almost always problematic—too public, too noisy, and even the most skillful facilitation can't compensate for the expectation of playing, eating, and hanging out.

It is important that you have a plan for advisors in spaces that do not have a board or way to project videos. One workaround is to create pairs of advisors who combine their groups for meetings that require them to use technology. You can also have plenty of chart paper, butcher paper, and markers on hand to help advisors compensate for the lack of a board.

Providing Materials for Advisors

In addition to handouts, many *Community Matters* activities require specific materials, such as advisory journals, sticky flip-chart paper, and colored markers. You can support your advisors by making sure the necessary materials are readily available on meeting days in a central location. The materials for each activity are included on the overview chart at the start of each section, as well as in the written description of each activity.

Grouping the Students into Advisories

Advisory is an intentional group, so the composition of groups deserves special attention. Advisory groups can be comprised in any number of ways that serve different goals and outcomes. Consider the following factors when deciding how to group students into advisories:

- Single grade versus mixed-grade groupings of students
- Advisories that remain together with the same advisor for multiple years versus new groups every year
- Dedicated grade-level groups at key points, such as ninth or twelfth grade, with advisors who specialize in those years
- Single-gender, ELL, or special-interest groups versus mixed groupings of students
- Advisors who teach or coach their advisees versus advisors who may or may not have advisees in class or on teams

Planning Advisory Meetings: Consistency versus Tailoring

There is often a tension that arises in advisory planning and implementation: Should all advisory groups do the same thing at the same time so groups have shared experiences that help support students and promote school culture? Or should advisors tailor what they are doing to meet the needs of their particular group on a particular day?

There are compelling arguments for both approaches. Some community-building experiences are crucial for group development, such as name games and contracting, and should be done by everyone within the same time frame. Also, there are experiences unique to advisory that every advisee deserves to have, like the individual attention, coaching, and support they receive from their advisor during mini-conferences. Finally, in *Community Matters: A Facing History and Ourselves Approach to Advisory*, there are important concepts and skills, such as following the scope and sequence, key activities like identity charts, and strategies like journaling designed to establish a sense of belonging and connectedness to school and each other.

On the other hand, groups gel at different speeds, and an advisory group of seniors that has been together with the same advisor for three years has different needs in the first two weeks of the school year than a new group of freshmen. Or one advisory group might be boisterous while another is naturally more introspective. Opening routines like “mindfulness minutes” can help the former transition from the passing period into advisory, while the latter group might benefit from a kinesthetic opening routine. Members of the first group might feel confident early in the year having individual mini-conferences, while members of the latter group might prefer to start their mini-conferences in pairs or trios until they establish a sense of trust with their advisor.

The following strategies can help administrators and advisory coordinators find a middle ground between consistency and supporting each group’s needs:

- Create a master advisory calendar for the first year of the program.
 - Record key benchmarks, such as mini-conferences, in the middle and end of each term.
 - Schedule advisory, class meetings, and whole-school assemblies for the year.
 - Identify faculty meetings or other times for advisory-specific professional development and list potential topics for each session.
- Using the **Sample Advisory Meeting Maps for the Opening Weeks** as a guide, create agendas for the first six weeks of the academic year. We recommend that you leave some space for flexibility in the sequence of events to allow for pacing adjustments.
- For the remainder of the year, the advisory coordinator or committee can schedule six to eight weeks’ worth of activities and lead professional development to help advisees prepare for each new section of the program.

- Support individual groups' needs by encouraging advisors to choose their own opening and closing routines for each meeting while keeping the content between the routines consistent across advisories.
- Decide when/if you will include "open choice" days for advisors and advisees to create their own agendas, and record these days on the master advisory calendar.

Advisory as a Go-To Structure When Troubling Events or Crises Arise

In the event of a school, community, national, or global crisis, advisory can provide a comforting space where advisors and advisees gather to process the event together. In these cases, school administrators might bring everyone together for an assembly to deliver a singular message about the tragedy or crisis and then have adults and students move into advisory groups, with counselors available in a central location to meet with students who need immediate professional support. When tragic events occur, it is important that the advisory coordinator and administrative team work together to provide advisors with some materials, such as a set of questions to prompt reflective journal writing and discussion.¹

¹ Rachel Poliner, a national leader and author for advisory programs, contributed to this section.