
Best Practices for Advisors

Advisory requires a paradigm shift in how adults think about their role in a school and their relationship to content. In traditional classrooms, teachers usually choose the content and deliver the material for students to learn. In advisory, the goals and roles are different. The adult's role is to facilitate community development, listen to and mentor students, and create spaces for reflection and discussion. The content is student-centered: What issues are students facing in school? How can advisory support all students in overcoming those obstacles, succeeding in school, and developing their voices? In this rich environment, advisees explore and expand their sense of who they are as individuals and what it means to be a contributing part of their school community.

To help create this student-centered learning environment, advisors should keep in mind the following keys to leading a successful advisory group:

Students are at the heart of advisory.

Students are the curriculum. The focus of your time together should be on helping them do their best in school, helping them consider their futures, helping them make good choices, and helping them be part of a supportive group. School climate and peer culture are also key focus areas for advisory—shaping a climate and peer culture to be physically safe, socially safe, and emotionally safe. The best emotional states for learning are comfortable and curious, not vigilant and defensive.

Relationships are the primary source of authority.

The primary source of authority comes from advisor relationships with their advisees—showing they care, getting to know them as individuals, becoming a trusted adult. Most advisories are not graded or offer only a small portion of a credit, so advisees participate because they have a voice in what is happening, get academic and emotional support, and learn about themselves and others, not because there are threats of low grades and non-credit. As teachers and administrators take on the role of advisor, it is important for the adults to build trusting relationships with their advisees while at the same time establishing and maintaining professional boundaries.

Leadership and ownership are shared.

Advisory should involve advisee leadership and a sense of shared ownership of the space and meeting time. Advisors should look for opportunities for advisees to run rituals and routines, suggest topics for discussion, or take on leadership roles in planning and implementing group projects.

Advisees are known and celebrated as unique individuals.

One of the roles of an advisor is to know each advisee well. To accomplish this goal, there are some simple but important practices to follow, including

- learning advisees' names and pronouncing them correctly,
- greeting advisees by name at the outset of every advisory meeting,
- knowing advisees' strengths, extracurricular activities, and hobbies,
- establishing a mini-conferencing routine, even if it is for two minutes with each advisee, as a regular part of advisory,
- and, if possible, having a few minutes of informal individualized conversation with each advisee each month about a topic other than academics.

Routines and rituals help create community.

Routines and rituals establish community, provide a structure for the group to follow, and help advisory feel different from academic classes.

- **Routines** are recurring strategies used during advisory meetings. Opening and closing routines mark the beginning and ending of each advisory meeting. Routines are also used to structure written reflections, to facilitate small-group and whole-group discussions, to relieve stress, and to guide goal setting and mini-conferences.
- **Rituals** provide opportunities to build connection and community by marking special occasions, such as holidays, school vacations, benchmarks (registering to vote, getting a driver's license, taking exams for the first time, the end of the year), and accomplishments (academic, extracurricular, or out-of-school). For example, your advisory group can develop a spirit-boosting ritual that they perform before a group member has a big game or performance.

The more that your advisory uses rituals and routines, the more your advisees will know how to participate in activities, take on leadership roles during meetings, and feel ownership of the space.

Advisory is an inclusive and welcoming space.

In order to improve their social skills and contribute in a positive way to the overall school climate, advisees have to talk with one another, not just with you, their advisor. For most advisory group purposes, the advisor should try to arrange the chairs, desks, or tables into a circle, square, or arc. Sitting in rows greatly impedes interaction. For small-group discussions, advisees should arrange their seats into small islands so that group members are close together and facing one another. Pairs might sit side by side in their chairs or on the floor to facilitate quieter conversations. You can start the year (and revisit when needed) by asking for advisee input on room design and establish a routine where they move the chairs safely, quietly, and quickly at the outset of the meeting, between activities, and before leaving for their next class.¹

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