7 AN ADVISING PROGRAM IN A LARGE URBAN HIGH SCHOOL: THE MAGIC MATCH

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I am going to describe a four-year effort to introduce an advising program into an urban public high school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It is, alas, not a success story with numbers that dazzle. If one works in schools, one develops a certain amount of humility from the struggle and effort that go into implementing a program. Rather, I have slowly built a program that I hope will affect students. Why am I doing this? In asking myself this question, I look for inspiration from some of the more visionary doctors in our field. Dr. Elvin Semrad (1948) was instrumental in improving the lives of many patients in state hospitals when he encouraged staff to create caring environments in which patients could be more self-reflective. I believe that therapists can help many disengaged adolescents in this country in a similar way. Advising programs that help teachers create a "holding environment" for adolescents will allow these teens to become more self-reflective and to take a more active role in their own education.

Fortunately, most of us can point either to our parents or to a caring adult who helped us navigate our teen years. If teenagers have family support or are lucky enough to go to an alternative or private high school, they will probably benefit from this type of relationship, which research shows is key to mental health. I want to find a way of adapting advising to large public high schools. The average public high school contains 2,000 to 4,000 students—a troubling arrangement by any standard.

In spite of adults' recognition that a good high school education is a key to a productive future, many urban adolescents continue to do poorly—skipping classes, failing courses, and showing many other signs of apathy toward academics. Teachers and administrators are

searching for new, effective ways of motivating students to care about their education and to take steps to plan constructively for their future. Lawrence Steinberg (1996), a prominent education researcher on motivation, has written that as many as 40% of American students of all social classes are disengaged from school. This apathy translates to poor performance on international tests and other well-known signs that indicate that our high schoolers are ill-prepared to meet the challenges of adulthood. Poor motivation is a formidable barrier to learning. There is an urgent need to develop effective interventions that prompt students to invest effort in their education. Academic engagement has also been identified as a critical protective factor against adolescent violence. Therefore, this is a promising prevention strategy.

Eccles et al. (1993) have critically analyzed the precipitous decline in performance as students move from elementary to high school. Two factors are known to limit student motivation: low confidence and the belief that one's ability to learn is predetermined. Students who believe that they are incompetent may decide that academic success is irrelevant rather than accept the belief that they are inadequate. The cycle begins when these same students fail to invest effort in their class work, avoid difficult classes, and redirect their energies to nonacademic activities. This guarantees failure and only confirms their lack of confidence and helplessness. Researchers and writers, including Lisa Delpit (1994), Louise and George Spindler (1988), Feldman and Elliott (1993), and Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan (1995), have documented extensive evidence that adolescent minorities and girls are especially at risk for failing or showing mediocre performances in high school.

Research by Meier (1995) and McDonald (1997) has demonstrated that, in general, learning is enhanced when constructive relationships are built between students and adults in a school. In small, alternative high schools, well-planned advisory programs have made a difference in outcomes for these at-risk populations. However, larger advising programs in public high schools have not been consistently executed or sufficiently evaluated to ensure similar success, or, in most cases, programs have not even been tried at all. This leaves a serious gap in our knowledge and understanding of how teacher–student connections in an advising program can effectively translate into increased motivation to learn. In Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot's (1983) eloquent examination of good high schools, she repeatedly comes back to what she calls the "magic match"—the crucial connection between a great teacher and a struggling student. If we know that this kind of contact is critical,

what can be done to make sure that as many students as possible in public high schools have the chance to make connections with caring adults?

Starting an Advising Program in Cambridge

Let me give some background to explain how I got involved in advising. Since 1995, I have worked as a mental health director at the Teen Health Center, a school-based clinic at Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School (CRLS) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Of its 2,000 students, about 60% are from racial or ethnic minorities. More than half are eligible to receive free lunch, and one third speak a first language other than English. Often, poor academic performance is only one of many problems confronting these teenagers. Teen pregnancy, substance abuse, broken homes, and numerous detentions and suspensions are all part of their troubled lives. The number of CRLS students who are failing is alarming: 30% of all students fail at least one class every semester. Even more disturbing is that the percentages for minorities are even higher: 47% of African American students and 38% of Latino students are experiencing such failures. It is not uncommon for failing students to be ignored and to be moved to the next grade (unless they provoke some disciplinary action, for which they are suspended or expelled).

Advising is an effort to address this cycle. Phase 1 took place over a five-month period in 1996 that teamed all 2,000 students with 200 adult volunteers from the school. The program evolved into phase 2 during 1997–1999—in which only ninth graders are targeted, and groups are led only by teachers who, in exchange for a lighter course load, meet weekly with students. There are currently 26 advisors teamed with 490 ninth graders. There is an effort to have each advisor also have the students in daily homeroom and an academic class. We anticipate expanding in the next two years to include tenth grade. All through the school year, groups of about fifteen students meet weekly with a caring teacher. The meetings are held during the regular school day and last for a typical class period. There is a specific curriculum, but there is also plenty of room for advisors to adapt to the needs of the students. I meet regularly with advisors to talk about how groups are going and about how they might successfully intervene with troubled

kids. We have done five surveys to learn more about students' experience of advising and to help determine how to improve advising. Although we do not have dramatic results to show changes in student achievement, I would offer that advising is necessary but not sufficient to support changes such as these. What I anticipate is that we may see changes over time after three to four years, when the program could affect how students use resources in high school and their improved attitudes toward learning. This may indirectly translate to students' higher grades and increased motivation.

We may find that 26 advisor meetings per year may not be intensive enough. However, we draw our satisfaction from the small steps we see happening in terms of students' knowing themselves better. When the program works, we see small, subtle shifts in student perceptions. We have learned from surveys that students value information that they receive in advising, especially about graduation requirements, how they manage their time, identifying learning styles, reviewing report cards, and learning how to work out problems in class. Although advisors provide concrete information, it is also an opportunity in a safe place for students to talk about school—from the prosaic, everyday hurdles to the more significant obstacles. Students may talk about a conflict that they may be having with a teacher and try to come up with strategies for dealing constructively with the conflict versus blowing up or going on strike. Or, they may discuss mundane things such as trying to figure out how to fit their books into a locker or how to understand credits. A full range of topics gets covered. The program is designed to help all students—those labeled nonlearners and learners alike. By providing students with more consistent discussion with an advisor to help them get the most from school, we hope to improve students' performance.

I have also learned why it is so hard to work in schools. Absolutely everything is open to debate. Some areas are easy to resolve; some are not.

To give an example of the process of debate, even naming the program was difficult. During our site visit to another advising program in Philadelphia, we learned that they called their program Family Group. Some staff at our high school referred to our initiative as Family Group too. Among some vocal Cambridge parents, this quickly was interpreted as a subversive effort by teachers to uncover family secrets and to supplant the role of parents. So, we thought that we would be accommodating and changed the name to Small-Group Discussion Program, but this was criticized as being too "shrinky." So, next came Academic

Advising Program, which sounds about as innocuous as you can get. This was attacked by school guidance counselors, who complained that academic advising was their territory. In the end, we decided to go with the most generic name—the Advising Program. This example gives a flavor of what it is like to work in the schools.

Without going into great detail, my advice to anyone interested in starting a similar program is to make sure the power brokers are identified and acknowledged when planning begins. This can save an enormous amount of time. Also, get the guidance counselors into the process so they won't see it as a threat to their job security. Define early on how the role of the advisor who is a teacher is different from that of a guidance counselor. The latter is seen as complementary to the efforts of the teacher. The guidance counselor comes into each advising group three times a year and provides concrete information about graduation requirements, transcripts, and how to decide course selection. The difference in responsibility is that guidance counselors usually have a load of 150 to 250 students, and the teacher is making a commitment to fifteen students.

The hardest decisions have been in determining (a) which students should participate in advising and devising the curriculum as a vehicle for establishing meaningful relationships between students and advisors and (b) how to train high school teachers (who specialize in delivering content) to become effective advisors.

It is critical to accept that there is a lot of trade-offs and no easy answers. For example, we faced the decision whether to involve all students or to select those students at risk. This is something that any of us working in schools wonders about: Do you run a preventive program or target those students at risk? Those who argued that advising should be reserved for high-risk students saw it as overkill to provide advising for stable, directed students who would be better served by focusing on academics. The additional concern was that students could be forced to work with an advisor they didn't like.

The proponents of including all students in the advising program gave several arguments. They saw advising as a preventive intervention. To preselect students would defeat this purpose. Also, many students who needed to examine their attitudes toward learning and their investment in school might not choose to participate, but they would be the very students we needed to engage. Also, by selecting only nonachieving students for the advising program, we would also be running the risk of stigmatizing them. They might feel more inadequate as a result.

If the goal is to build on students' strengths, then, ideally, all students will have something to offer. Also, the benefit of self-reflection is not reserved for failing students. An example of the strength of having an inclusive model in which all students participate follows. In one of the groups, students discussed homework and how sometimes they "totally blew it off," which can ensure failing a class. Having a mixed group of achieving and nonachieving students resulted in a profound conversation about the fact that some students didn't hand in homework and that it reflected the fact that they didn't have any adult in their life to monitor them. Those kids who routinely handed in homework had a parent or someone who was invested in making sure that they performed.

CRLS resolved this conflict by making a reasonable compromise. All students were expected to participate, but there was a mechanism for students to opt out after meeting with an administrator. The fantasy was that we would have a mass exodus of students opting out. What we found was that, of 2,000 students in phase 1, only two went through the formal route of opting out. This is consistent with a survey result that 85% of students said that they wanted to figure out how to do better in school. Advising was seen as a vehicle for helping students to achieve this result.

Our decision to write a formal curriculum came out of concerns that surfaced in phase 1 of the program. In phase 1, we found that, although students enjoyed meeting with advisors, they saw little connection between advising and academics. Our goal in the curriculum is to help ninth graders make a smooth transition to CRLS in two basic areas—orientation and academic support. In orientation, they learn, for example, to locate key areas in the high school, to understand the roles of adults in the building, to understand the rules and policies (especially the policies about attendance, school tardiness, and graduation requirements), to begin charting self-progress, and to ask for support from teachers. In academic support are opportunities to learn effective organizational strategies for keeping up with the classes, to get an introduction to time management, to develop a four-year plan, to generate quick writing samples, and to identify their learning styles and potential career interests. The curriculum is ideally used as the scaffolding to build a caring relationship by conveying certain information and showing interest in students' decisions.

In working with teachers, I have been impressed by their resourcefulness. A lot of the curriculum comes from suggestions that teachers and

I worked on together. For example, in terms of orientation, a group of teachers figured out a clever way of doing orientation. While advising, they asked, "Are you oriented?" The students relied that they knew where things were located. This meant that they could chart themselves from one class to the next, but they did not have a clue about the various resources that were available in the school (e.g., Teen Health Center, tutoring service). So, the teachers set up a game. Advising groups interviewed school personnel to find out about different resources. If the school personnel thought that the students had performed well, then they would give them advising money. The students who earned the most "advising money" were then allowed to go out to lunch with their advisors. This is a very clever way of forging a positive relationship with shy ninth graders.

I would suggest that, of the teachers who are advisors, probably 30% can do advising in their sleep. However, 30% to 40% of teachers are awkward with moving from their role of being a teacher and delivering content to being an advisor. One thing is clear after four years: Staff development needs to be more intensive and individualized for teachers who lack classroom management skills that are helpful in engaging teenagers.

After experimenting with several formats that included afternoon workshops featuring inspirational speakers from outside the high school, we shifted our focus to give advisors time each week to meet and simply talk about how they ran their groups. Concurrently, I am spending more time observing the groups. The goal is to observe each of the 25 groups twice a year to identify concrete strategies that work with this student population.

We were surprised that we did not always find the problems that teachers anticipated. Before starting the program, many advisors worried that students would reveal overwhelming intimate details about their lives (e.g., abuse, abortions). What really happened was that teenagers were cautious and did not share readily. So, the most common problem for advisors wasn't an outpouring of deep, dark, secrets but rather dealing with the silence they encountered in 80% of the groups.

For students, the biggest problem we identified was how to relate the conversations in advising groups to everyday classroom experience. For example, one survey identified that, although most students expect to go to college, they do not always make the connection between hard work and attaining this goal. Eighty-one percent of students with D averages and 79% of students with F averages reported that they in-

tended to go to college. We are working to emphasize the necessity of hard work to reach goals.

The most troubling finding to emerge from student surveys related to the comfort level students had when dealing with adults in the high school. Black students were far less likely to rely on an adult in the high school than white students were, according to our survey responses. Two thirds of white students versus less than a third of black students relied on adults. This will be an important variable to track over time; it will also be important to see if black students begin to see an advisor as a potential resource. We anticipate that addressing the alienation of these black students may take more than making adult relationships available. Mark Freedman, in *The Kindness of Stranger* (1993), recognizes the limitations of mentoring with some alienated black teenagers. He points to difficulties including the "generation gap," lifestyle differences, and class differences. He warns that mentors must bridge this gap before they can make a connection. If not, mentors run the risk of having goals that are irrelevant to the youngsters and of misunderstanding the indifferent pose that ultimately isolates these kids from the kind of support critical for their development.

Another finding was, predictably, that the students who indicated that they had never seen their advisors one-on-one or that they had seen them less than two times a year one-on-one were less likely to state that their advisor got to know them.

There are some days that I feel that our program still has a long way to go. So far, it has failed to translate into better student–teacher relations among minority populations and even to convince some teachers of the need to interact with their students beyond subject matter. For example, 46 students out of 240 surveyed stated that they never spoke with the advisor one-on-one. The one-on-one interactions were often as simple as stopping in the hall for a quick check-in. The students' answers on the survey were consistent with advisors' observations that, if they had students for core subjects and/or homeroom, they felt much more effective in their efforts to understand and support students. Therefore, we made every effort this year to pair the advisors with their homeroom students. In staff development this year, I am working with teachers to structure one-on-one discussions with students.

In closing, I want to share a favorite quotation. Maybe part of my interest in working with adolescents is that I am still one at heart and I am still searching for the perfect yearbook quotation. William Sloane Coffin (1993), in *A Passion for the Possible*, writes, "Hope makes us

persistent when we can't be optimistic, faithful when results elude us. For like nothing else in the world, hope arouses a passion for the possible, a determination that our children not be asked to shoulder burdens we let fall." I am sure that each one of us has a commitment to providing opportunities for children, and in my own small way I am trying to extend that guarantee in the schools. It is not easy, but schools are the right place for applying our type of professional skills because where the kids are is the best place to do preventive care.

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