

**BEING KNOWN:
A Pilot Advisory Program**
An action research study
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Research Question

Would small “advisory” group sessions help my most academically “at risk” students successfully complete high school? More specifically, would a small, intimate “advisory” group help my students with no history of academic success graduate from high school?

Rationale

I teach in a New York City public high school of approximately 600 students. My students range in age between 17-21. We are one of 28 remaining schools actually classified as “Alternative” left in the New York City public school system.

Of our 600 kids, approximately 80% are recently immigrated Chinese students. These students are enrolled in an intensive, sophisticated English as a Second Language (ESL) program offered by our school, and the college rate of our Chinese students is exceptionally high.

The remaining, “other” 20% is a wandering, languishing, frustrated group of mostly African American and Hispanic American students expelled from other New York City public schools. These kids seek a “second chance” to receive a regular high school diploma in a place where they can keep trying until they turn 21. The most common reason for the prior expulsion of these students is failure; most of these students simply flunked out of their previous schools. These students rarely pass all of their classes in any given semester, few of them actually graduate from our school, and very few of them go on to college.

I teach almost all of these “20%” students in my mainstream English literature classes, and I know them very well. From talking to and working closely with many of them, I have discovered that most of these students have long histories of very poor or very inconsistent attendance, and repeated failures of the same classes over and over again. I watch them wander the hallways, fight sleep, cut class, and give up. At the end of each marking period, I watch them grapple sadly for just enough points to pass, and so often I watch them walk out our door and vanish as though they were never here.

These students have become very important to me over the course of my three years at my school. They are considered “minorities” even within our public school, and they are spoken of and to in a group. They are often dismissed for reasons some associate with race and background, and their talents and worries go largely unnoticed. These are, of course, individual students with individual issues who, in the end, do not get what they need: An adult at our school to know them, and to use that knowledge to help them succeed.

The Study

This year, with the support of my administration, I created a small pilot advisory program to try to reach some of the most academically “at risk” students falling in this 20%. In exploring the advantages of advisory programs documented by countless educational publications, school mission statements, pedagogies, and fellow educators, I wondered if

such a program might help some of these students graduate. I thought that perhaps regular meetings of small groups of students, led by trained staff members might help identify and address some of the obstacles these students face, which might lead to graduation.

What is an Advisory?

According to an NMSA Research Summary of an article called “Advisory Programs” released in 1996:

An advisory program is an arrangement whereby one adult and a small group of students have an opportunity to interact on a scheduled basis in order to provide a caring environment for academic guidance and support, everyday administrative details, recognition, and activities to promote citizenship (p. 1)

Another theorist, C. Stevenson, author of “Teaching Ten to Fourteen Year Olds (1989),” states that the purposes of advisories

...are to ensure that each student is known well at school by at least one adult who is that youngster’s advocate (the advisor), to guarantee that every student belongs to a peer group, to help every student find ways to be successful, and to promote coordination between home and school. (pg. 293)

This idea of being “known” made me think. It is easy enough to identify our wandering 20% non-Chinese students in the hallway, but of course it can be difficult to know any student well. Some of our 20% are intensely angry, and often exasperated or completely exhausted by the idea of school, which sometimes means they are hard to know. Many of these students are also extraordinarily talented, in areas ranging from visual art to mathematics. This combination can be confusing to teachers, guidance counselors, and to the students themselves, who are much more ready and comfortable to qualify their poor performance and behavior in terms of ineptitudes. I really liked the idea of getting to know one small group very well in a calm, structured way.

It took us until late March of this year to finally hire a social worker who speaks English well and has solid experience running small groups programs in schools. By early April, she and I designed a seven-session pilot program schedule targeting the following topics and areas:

Session One	Brainstorming Goals, Needs
Session Two	Hopes and Fears for the Future
Session Three	Time Management
Session Four	Organization
Session Five	Transcript Review (reading numbers and feelings found there)
Session Six	Conflict Resolution
Session Seven	Graduation: Anxiety and Hope

Advisory Schedule and Topics

We then profiled, identified, and invited 10 students who all met all of the following criterion:

Criterion One	Previously failed two or more classes per semester enrolled at our school
Criterion Two	Considered “American Born” by our guidance department, or, more accurately, are not enrolled in our ESL program
Criterion Three	Appears to have an appropriate level academic ability, but have not been able to pass classes on any consistent basis

Criterion for Advisees

Of the ten students we identified and invited, seven showed up on the first day. To the next session, six showed up. From that point on, those same six students came faithfully to all of our remaining sessions.

The sessions were held at lunchtime once a week, for seven weeks. They were co-led by our new social worker and me, students came on a completely voluntary basis. We did not give academic credit, give out free cash, perform any acts of coercive force, nor, in a laudable exercise of willpower, did we order pizza to entice our kids to come. It was very hard not to make that call for delivery, knowing that if we did, all 10 kids would show up every week, but we knew it was important not to cloud whatever data we could gather with straight out bribery.

My colleague and I met once a week, on the Mondays prior to our Wednesday sessions, to discuss the week’s session in detail. There, we discussed each student, reviewed the prior session, and adjusted our program as necessary.

My colleague arranged to meet with our advisees one-on-one at other times during the week. Both the students and my colleague found this time to be invaluable. The students reported that it was good to talk to someone they knew, and reported that they appreciated the undivided personal attention from someone who cared about them. My colleague reported that her one-on-one sessions allowed her to get to know the students further and in her own way, and therefore gain their trust. I had my own one-on-one, more relaxed time with them often and on a regular basis, seeking them out in the hallway, and in my classroom.

Our administration arranged for compensation for our extra planning time. Our Assistant Principal for Guidance checked in with us often, offered to supply materials, and paid for the pizza party we finally threw at the end. The sessions would not have been what they were without this critical support.

An Inconclusive Study

From the beginning, I knew that no matter how tailored our program, there was just about no chance of abrupt change in the academic performance of these students after seven advisory sessions. I knew that this action research study would be a great deal more about the process of inquiry than hard data. So, after our last session, I spoke at length with the students in our advisory about our program, had them respond to some written questions about how they feel now, and conducted recorded interviews with each to find out why they came to our sessions, what they found when they got there, and why they returned each week.

A Review of the Literature

Before I even approached our administration with my idea, I visited other high schools to see their advisory programs in action, and spoke to several guidance counselors and social workers in the system. I also read a great deal of research published on the effectiveness of advisory programs.

Much of the data-based or qualitative research done on the success of advisory programs in the United States has been done in middle schools, where the idea was originally implemented. In recent years, advisory programs are more common in high schools, but the most basic core of advisory programs seems to be agreed upon by most researchers, and seems to be relatively consistent from program to program. So, I figured so I'd start there; at the heart of the philosophy.

Defining the heart and soul of advisory programs in an article published in 2004 entitled "Advisory Program Research and Evaluation," Reino Makkonen, states:

At its heart, advisory forges connections among students and the school community, creating conditions that facilitate academic success and personal growth.

The New Visions for Public Schools is a group of new small high schools in New York City that incorporate advisory as part of regular school structure. The New Visions collective website echoes a similar idea:

Advisory offers emotional support for students... First it supplies built-in peer groups for all students in a high school... second, it gives students an adult who knows them well and who can offer advocacy and support in difficult social and academic situations.
(www.newvisions.com)

As does Jim Burns, Director of Member and Affiliate Services for the National Middle School Association, in an article called "The Five Attributes of Satisfying Advisories":

Strong advisory programs are fundamental to effective...schools. [Advisories are] aimed at helping students develop constructive relationships with their peers, with key adults, and with their communities...

So the hearts of most advisory programs are very similar: To connect students to each other, to a teacher who, over time, gets to know them well, and to their community for the academic purpose of, ultimately, graduation.

That heart is hard to argue with; it would be difficult for any educator to suggest that the building of close relationships between students, teachers and communities doesn't lead to good things in the classroom. But, as Makkonen points out, "Intuitively, the [advisory concept] makes perfect sense. But that isn't enough."

It makes sense, of course; small close groups of students and teachers is a pedagogically sound and well documented advantage to student achievement. However, alone they do not directly affect the academic success of students across the board. Advisories exist in many schools in many different ways. Makkonen notes the complicated task of getting data-based results from advisories:

...After all, how do you quantify a relationship? [Different]... advisory programs obviously net different results. Advisory is...rarely a school's sole strategy for supporting students and fostering personalization. When a school adopts advisory in conjunction with smaller, longer classes, a focus on project-based learning and performance assessments, and a more democratic leadership mode, it becomes tough to measure the results of each individual effort.

Though logical, this was frustrating to me until I realized: My school and purpose don't fit the profile described above at all. Our classes are generally large, typically between 25 and 32 students in each, and are only 45 minutes long. Almost none of our classes are "project-based," and ours is more or less a top-down administration. Also, I did not necessarily need to track "personalization," I needed to track grades, attendance, and ultimately, graduation rates. It occurred to me that with my very specific goals and trackable controls, I might be able to clearly tell if our advisory group was working.

In 1994 a study was published by Simpson and Boriack called "Chronic absenteeism: A Simple Success Story." For this study, Simpson and Boriack targeted 70 "chronically delinquent" students in a Texas middle school, and implemented an advisory program specifically built to reduce absenteeism. They found that by meeting daily and working closely with students in advisory, the school was able to generate "immediate and very gratifying" results. According to this study, the average daily attendance among the students skyrocketed from 76 percent in the first 12 weeks to 95 percent for the next 24.

Having found this, a study focused specifically on an issue that affects my students, and with a clear, direct relationship between that which is being tested and its results, I met with our administration.

Tools

For our advisory group, I used the following tools to create a group profile as well as individual case studies of each student in our advisory group.

- **Transcripts** of each advisee containing all grades from all schools attended since first admitted to first high school

- **Report Cards** of each advisee for first and second marking periods of the 2004-2005 academic year
- Advisee **written surveys** about experience being “known” at our school, self-perceptions as students, biggest hopes, biggest fears, and general experience with advisory this year
- Recorded in-depth **interviews** of each advisee about past high schools, coming to our school, and why each chose to attend our meetings

Group Profile

From the data gathered, we can draw the following conclusions about the advisees as a whole:

- All advisees have failed at least 20 classes since they began high school
- All advisees have taken at least 50 classes since they began high school
- No advisee has higher than a 60% cumulative GPA
- Five out of six advisees have extraordinarily low attendance rates in at least one class
- All advisees raised his or her grade in at least one class since our advisory group started meeting
- All advisees lowered the grade of at least one class since our advisory group started meeting
- Of the three students who took the survey, three out of three are worried that they will not succeed in life, either by academic or economic measures
- Of the three students who took the survey, three out of three think of advisory as a place to talk and think about things that are on their minds, and three out of three find that our advisory provided this environment
- All six interviewees previously attended very large high schools and came to our school largely because it was so much smaller
- All six interviewees said that they learned something useful in advisory
- All six advisees mentioned that they were taken aback by how many Chinese students attend our school, and mentioned that race has played a role in their willingness and ability to become acclimated to the school

By looking at the group as a whole, we can see that repeated failures, high and/or selective absenteeism, and poor or failing grades plague more than one of our students. We can also see that these students attend our school specifically to be in a smaller environment, that many of these students feel like minorities in our school, and that each student asked had a positive response to advisory.

Case Studies

The individual **Case Studies** break down the data for each student, include anecdotal evidence from conversations and experiences, and provides an individual analysis based on the data. The case studies reveal the pronounced differences between the aptitudes, skills, strengths, obstacles, concerns, and issues of each student. The case studies give us language with which to speak about each individual advisee in specific, personal terms. This language and analysis could lead to instructional cues for teachers, which could help each student become more successful in the classroom. Possible instructional cues are included in each analysis, and in all cases, were tested in the classroom with positive results.

STUDENT ONE: A Comedian

From the specific data about Student One, we can deduce the following things:

Transcript:

- Student One has failed roughly half of the classes taken
- Student One entered LESP in 2003 and still has only 25 of the 40 credits necessary to graduate, with a barely passing GPA
- Student One shows exceptional aptitude in early math

Report Card:

- Student One has nearly no absences
- The grades of seven classes dropped since we began advisory sessions

Survey:

- Student One appears to want a “good job” but lists no inclination as to what kind of job he wants or what “good” means
- Student One appears to participate in class and in class activities, but does not pass his classes

Interview:

- Student One felt his last high school was too big for him to function
- Student One is a Resource Room, or Special Education Student
- Student One enjoys hearing other people’s opinion about topics he finds compelling
- Student One feels “known” by the one teacher who knows, understands, and presumably accepts the academic areas he feels insecure about

Analysis:

In class, Student One pulls pranks. They are well calculated, carefully planned, they often involve props. Expertly placed Whoopie Cushions. “Body Alarms” set off, perfectly

timed, and amplified to excruciating levels. Pen stealing. Voice throwing. Imitations. He's no amateur.

Student One rarely completes written work of any kind. When he does, it fulfills the very bare minimum of the assignment. However, his comments in class are most often thoughtful and relevant. In our advisory discussions about hopes and fears during the second session, student one expressed real fear about not graduating. Despite his recent academic improvement, that fear has seriously stuck with him; he stated, "I've been in high school so long I can't imagine leaving." In addition, Student One is incredibly self-effacing. He refers to himself often as a "loser just trying to get by," and the "official bench warmer for the basketball team." But each time he received a pointed comment about the truth or thoughtfulness of his contributions, Student One repeatedly rose to the occasion. Since our advisory sessions began, Student One has spent more time with other members of the group, completed more English homework on several occasions, and his in-class comedy has been selective.

The transcript data here suggests that Student One has been in high school a long time. His RCT test data shown his "special education" status, yet his Regents Exam in Math A shows he excels in math. His survey clearly reveals a fear of failing to graduate, and his interview indicates that he needs and functions best in a small, close environment where the pressure is lifted; where he finally has the calm to listen as well as perform.

There are clear instructional cues here for Student One. Making sure he receives affirmation for thoughtful comments, recognizing a possible insecurity with reading and writing, recognizing his accomplishments in other academic areas, and creating smaller group work in the classroom can all help this student succeed. The real key, however, comes from knowing him. When you do, you know that for Student One, real fear lies just below the comedy, and that real fear could prevent him from wanting to leave a safe environment for the unknown of the larger world.

Student One and I had several conversations on this topic, and my colleague addressed this issue with him as well. I asked him to think about possible internship ideas for next year, when he will still be with us, and this got him talking about some career ideas he has. We came up with some concrete things to follow up with in September, and he seemed to relax. As we talked, he joked less, and seemed to enjoy, for the moment, talking about the future. The following day, he turned in his English homework.

STUDENT TWO: A Poet

From the specific data about Student Two, we can deduce the following things:

TRANSCRIPT DATA

- Student Two has failed roughly half of the classes she has taken
- Student Two has been at our school for more than 3 years
- Student Two has attempted 84 classes since she began high school, and has less than a passing cumulative GPA

REPORT CARD DATA

- Student Two has a significantly low attendance
- Student Two has made improvements in four of her five classes since advisory began

SURVEY DATA

- Student Two did not take the survey

INTERVIEW DATA

- Student Two accepted the encouragement of a peer (boyfriend) to go back to school
- Student Two is motivated to do well in order to care for her younger brother
- Student Two is angry
- Student Two uses poetry to vent her anger
- Student Two has already experienced positive effects of advisory
- The concept of actually “Being known” might be foreign to Student Two

Analysis:

To look at the sum total of the DOE’s data for Student Two is to look at education’s equivalent of a rap sheet. Student Two has taken more than 80 classes, and has passed 35. Her attendance record is stark, and there are no comments, on any report card, in the column provided on her report cards. As seems to be evident in her records and files, adults have not paid much attention to Student Two.

Student two has just had her first poem published in our school’s literary magazine, and she recently read it onstage in front of the school.

When Student Two was first enrolled in our school three years ago, she very rarely came to class. When she did, she would put the hood of her large sweatshirt over her head, put her head down, and outright refuse to sit up, look up, or leave the room.

Since that time, Student Two and I have spent a lot of time together, particularly when I noticed her reading one day underneath her hood. Student Two has a complicated home situation, one involving abuse, police, foster care, and ultimately, partial custody of her three year old half brother. Student Two stated to me, “I read to escape.”

Last week, Student Two left her home and placed herself in a shelter for young women, and has written poetry about her experiences. She faithfully came to each advisory session, even when she did not come to school for the rest of the day. In one session, she asked for and took down the phone numbers of each person in the room.

Thanks to our advisory classes, Student Two has found four friends with whom she now spends most of her time. As she stated in her interview, “Advisory is important to me now, I don’t know what we did that made it that way. It was good to talk to people and make friends. I needed them. I needed you guys.” She reached out to all four of them, to

me, and to our social worker during what has been a very difficult past two months for her.

Shortly after our advisory sessions began, Student Two turned in her first completed assignment to me. As our sessions progressed, she came for two lunchtime revision sessions, and asked for help with the balance of her work for my class. By the end of the year, she had completed every major written assignment assigned to her. She stated that advisory helped her feel like people cared about her and wanted her to succeed in school. In this case, I believe our results are very clear.

STUDENT THREE: An Independent Spirit

From the specific data about Student Three, we can deduce the following things:

TRANSCRIPT DATA

- Student three has failed nearly half of the classes she has attempted since she began high school
- Student three has been absent for four regents exams or other major standardized tests
- Student three has a cumulative GPA of less than passing, she has been enrolled in high school for nearly four years, and has earned slightly more than half of the credits she needs to graduate.

REPORT CARD DATA

- Student Three lowered the grades of three of her classes since our advisory began

SURVEY DATA

- Student Three shows an intense desire to be independent, and to succeed on her own
- Student Three feels that advisory is a place to talk about the things that stand in her way

INTERVIEW DATA

- Student Three chose our school herself
- Student Three prefers the small group environment of a common culture
- Student Three has a strong desire to “do her own thing,” but also wants to be known

Analysis:

Student Three and her old school mutually decided she should go elsewhere, at which point Student Three found our school online, got her paperwork in order, and transferred herself. While Student Three states in her interview that she is “comfortable” around our Asian students because she is “part Philippino,” she also expresses a strong desire to be among American-born students on a more regular basis at our school. It would appear that Student Three has failed so many of her classes due to conflicts with those teaches

she claims “don’t like” students, but in advisory she admitted she has a “no homework” policy. “I don’t do homework,” she said.

In fact, Student Three does not do homework in part because she is in charge of food shopping, cooking dinner, and taking care of her younger brother once she gets home. Once all that is taken care of, Student Three stated that she feels “entitled” to her “own time,” and that “homework does not fit in there.” It also became clear during advisory that time management is a very difficult thing. While Student Three has made several attempts to manage her own time, she finds that emergency situations at home can throw her schedule off track, so that she often is at the mercy of her family. When we calculated the amount of hours we spend doing specific things during an average week, Student Three learned that she would need to triple the amount of time in a week to accomplish all that she needs to do. In advisory we spoke a great deal about things that can obstruct our time management efforts, and how to work around them. With Student Three, we suggested, since she didn’t need to be home until 4:30pm, she stay at school to complete her written homework, and do her reading on the subway. Since then, Student Three has turned in at least one homework assignment to each of her classes.

The vigor with which Student Three claims her “independence” often does sends a clear message for people to stay back, just as she said in her interview: “Sometimes I feel like being known, sometimes I don’t.” However, in her survey, Student Three wrote that her biggest hope was “to show my mother I did better without her, that I’m not the devil’s kid...” The more we explored our relationships with the people in our houses in advisory, the more we heard about the strained relationship between Student Three and her very religious mother. Student Three stated that she feels “watched,” not known.

There seem to be several instructional cues here. Helping Student Three work with a schedule that feels hectic, restrictive and non-negotiable to her could show acceptance for her family duties and obligations while helping her meet the requirements of graduation. Understanding that she feels “watched” in other areas of her life can offer direct clues as to how to communicate with her in the classroom.

In my classroom, I left Student Three to sort of help “organize” a collaborative assignment she was well capable of completing. I offered all of my students the option of working alone on another. We continue to talk about what is going on at home. Student Three submitted her final paper for our course, even though she knew she would not pass the class.

STUDENT FOUR: An Artist

From the specific data about Student Four, we can deduce the following things:

TRANSCRIPT DATA

- Student Four has failed more than half of the classes he has attempted
- Student Four has been absent to two Regents Exams since he began high school
- Student Four has earned nearly 40 credits, but not enough in areas not considered “art”

- Student Four has a barely passing average

REPORT CARD DATA

- Student Four improved three grades since the beginning of advisory
- Student Four has dropped three grades since the beginning of advisory

SURVEY DATA

- Student Four did not take this survey

INTERVIEW DATA

- Student Four came from a large high school that specialized in art
- Student Four wants to fight the stereotypes often applied to him
- Student Four wants to be known for more than his race and even his talents

Analysis:

As evident from the data, Student Four has a hard time passing academic classes. Many of his credits earned, as evident on his transcript, are art classes which he took at his previous high school, a specialized public art school. He left that school, as he stated in his interview, “because it was too big, and they didn’t really care about art.”

Student Four has been commissioned by several large New York City organizations, festivals, and galleries to create and exhibit his art publically. While his photography and sketching abilities are most visible in our hallways, his mural work can be seen in various public places. His favorite medium is charcoal.

In class, Student Four has an intensely difficult time concentrating on any one thing for a sustained (longer than 2-3 minutes) amount of time. He has a difficult time maintaining a linear train of thought when speaking. When attempting to write formally about a given topic, the concept of a “thesis statement,” or central idea, is evasive and foreign, and while he will often begin such work, I have never seen any come to completion.

Student Four is known and well-liked by American-born students as well as mainstreamed Chinese students. He has collaborated artistically with some Chinese students who have not yet reached mainstream classes as well. He is generous in class, often offering assistance to English language learners, and is not usually disruptive. He is frustrated often by the work in class.

It seems that the most obvious instructional cue with Student Four are his blocks to writing, linear thinking, and sustaining focus. While non-linear thinking likely help him craft and create his art, it serves as an obstacle when attempting traditional assignments.

In my classroom, I altered the way I work with Student Four as well as many other students who have similar experiences with writing. I developed a graphic organizer for essays that allow for non-linear thought collecting, and presented it to all of my classes. While Student Four did not complete enough work to pass the class, these tactics have

worked; Student Four began, sought help for, completed, then submitted the last two short essays of the year, a process he stated he had never seen through to the end before.

STUDENT FIVE: A Fighter

From the specific data about Student Five, we can deduce the following things:

TRANSCRIPT DATA

- Student Five has passed just over half the classes she's taken in high school
- Student Five has a below passing cumulative GPA

REPORT CARD DATA

- Student five has extraordinarily high absences in specific classes, and a noteworthy number of whole day absences
- Student Five has raised two grades since advisory started
- Student Five has dropped two grades since advisory started

SURVEY DATA

- Student Five's "biggest fear" is that her "biggest hope" will not come true
- Student Five feels that advisory is a place to come and to talk

INTERVIEW DATA

- Student Five appreciates the opportunity to vent about things she feels the need to fight against
- Student Five feels somehow oppressed, and wants to "tell" people about how and why
- Student Five wants and needs to be known and understood

Analysis:

Student Five has been absent for six major standardized tests for which she was scheduled. She is close to graduation, and she has aspirations to attend and graduate college. Student Five, as evident in her interview, views our advisory as an opportunity to "tell" about things in her life. As she stated in our interview, she wants to "tell about things that are not right in this school, and some things that need to be changed." Student Five has also stated, both in the recorded interview as well as informally, that she does not feel known, heard, or listened to, and while absolutely confident that she can "take care of business" when she needs to regarding school, is deeply concerned that she will not graduate high school, and will not succeed in college.

Student Five's disposition is aggressive. Often, she would enter our advisory sessions angrily, refuse to speak about the cause, and make disparaging remarks to other students in the room. When revealed, the sources of Student Five's greatest frustrations are her relationship with her mother, and the unfair treatment she receives from teachers.

Once the sessions begin, Student Five initially does a lot of “telling.” However, most often, once she has vented, she becomes a good listener for other students, and can be very supportive and generous.

From what Student Five has stated of her home life in our sessions, she has several brothers and sisters, and often feels she has no privacy. She also noted that her mother “only has time to pay attention to when we do bad.”

Clearly there is complex information still to be gathered about Student Five, but just examining the bit we’ve uncovered reveals important instructional cues. Student Five feels unheard, and unrecognized for the good work she does.

I have modified the way I speak to Student Five in class. I am mindful of offering positive affirmations for jobs well done, and have made certain that both positive feedback and constructive criticism on her work is thoughtful, personalized, and honest. I have also found that Student Five responds very well to group work during which she can be both supported and supportive. Because of her conflicts with other teachers on our staff, I have brought her name to an “open forum” faculty session, where we discussed some of our advisory findings. This semester, Student Five not only passed every class on her program, but she earned an 87% in my class.

STUDENT SIX: A Friend

From the specific data about Student Six, we can deduce the following things:

TRANSCRIPT DATA

- Student Six has failed more classes than she has passed in her high school career
- Student Six shows exceptionally high aptitudes in English and Spanish standardized tests
- Student Six has been absent for 5 Regents Exams or other standardized tests

REPORT CARD DATA

- Student Six has exceptionally low daily attendance, and even lower attendance in math and physical education
- Student Six has improved the grades in three classes since advisory started
- Student Six has dropped the grades in two classes since advisory started

SURVEY DATA

- Student Six did not take the survey

INTERVIEW DATA

- Student Six feels lonely
- Student Six feels as though no one cares whether or not she succeeds

- Student Six came to advisory in order to build relationships
- Student Six could possibly feel depressed, alone

Student Six has an average of 19 absences per semester. This semester, for her classes held before lunch, she has 26 absences. In our interview, I asked her why she is absent more in the mornings. She answered, “Because I don’t feel like getting up.”

According to our interview, Student Six is lonely, and she has been for what feels to her like a long time. As she states, she attended our advisory to make personal connections at our school. Student Six noted that during her first years of high school her parents separated, and she was left to manage herself while her mother worked to support their family. While Student Six felt connected to her mother, she did not feel she saw her often. She also stated that during her second year of high school, her friends began to drift, taking different classes, and spending less time with her. After awhile, she said, she just stopped going.

The theme of loneliness is so prevalent in the data gathered from Student Six during our advisory sessions, that it seems the first issue to address when developing instructional cues. Possible depression, abandonment, and feeling uncared for all have been road blocks to Student Six’s education, insofar as they have kept her from coming to school. While Student Six likely suffers from many complicated layers of emotional distress causing unfavorable consequences to many areas of her education, it seems that loneliness causes her to stay at home. In order for us to develop her academic success, she has to be in the building. The instructional cues we took from our work with Student Six concerned how to make her feel cared for, listened to, and known.

Hard-earned trust does not magically appear after seven sessions. During our sessions, Student Six was often quiet, but listened intently, and would contribute earnestly when asked a direct question. In my classroom, I made it a point to ask Student Six about her responses to various characters during class discussions, and her comments often sparked whole-group conversations. As we had more of these conversations, her attendance to my class, held at the end of the day, improved. I made it a point to tell Student Six how glad I was she showed up, every time I saw her. After our interview was over, Student Six and I talked a long time about next year, about her goals, her fears, and the friends she’s made at our school. She said she hoped our advisory sessions would continue, and that the same people would be in them.

Inconclusions

Our advisory group is brand new. Because it is so new, we can not yet determine if our program will lead our “at-risk” students to graduation, nor am I prepared to make specific policy recommendations. However, there is a great deal of evidence and data here to support the continuation of the program. In only seven weeks, our program has been directly responsible for not only raising the grades, but providing critical emotional support of at least one student, a student who has long been considered one of our most “at risk” students. Six out of six students stated that they will keep coming to our sessions

next year, on a voluntary basis. Six out of six students stated that they came to our school for a small setting, and that our advisory provided that environment. Six out of six students stated that they were sad our meetings were ending for the year. Two out of two facilitators feel extraordinarily proud and happy with the work they did. So happy, that at the eighth meeting—a going away party—we served pizza.

Some Big Questions

There are so many remaining questions for us to ponder for the future, if in fact our program has one :

- How long should students remain with the same advisor?
- How do we comprehensively select which students should participate in a larger advisory program?
- What if other teachers are not interested in participating in the program?
- Would advisory be more effective as a part of a student's regular schedule rather than at lunchtime?
- Would advisory be more effective with more students?
- Should advisories at our school involve all students in heterogeneously mixed groups of Chinese and "American Born" students?
- If so, how should we deal with the language barriers?

A Very Big Question

There is some question as to whether or not we will be allowed to continue our program next year. Because our school's budget has been so uncertain, and our guidance department does not regularly factor social work into that budget, my colleague was forced to leave our school for more reliable work. I will continue to work with small groups, even voluntarily next year, and hope that our guidance department sees our results as solid reason to hire another social worker and continue it. It is my optimistic belief that after reviewing this collection of data, another social worker will take my colleague's place. When that happens, we will dust off our hopes and dreams charts and begin again.

