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HOW CAN AN ADVISORY PROGRAM BE IMPLEMENTED INTO THE

STRUCTURE OF A LARGE SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL TO FOSTER ACADEMIC

SUCCESS IN NINTH-GRADE STUDENTS?

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education

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To my exceedingly patient wife.

"The true character of a society is revealed in how it treats its children. "

- Nelson Mandela

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

<u>Education Reform Then and Now</u>

There are many measures that seem to imply that our system of education in this country is not on par with the rest of the world's developed countries. From the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores to the perpetual existence of educational achievement and opportunity gaps around the country, from our national standards to college retention and graduation rates we are not seeing the desired and promised results that we seek. It certainly appears that the U.S. does not make the grade when it comes to educating our youth. There is a societal anxiety over the current condition of education that emanates from just about every newsstand and blog space. The rhetoric abounds blaming everyone from the teachers to the teachers' unions, from the parents to the children themselves.

For years, the American educational system has been in a perpetual state of flux. Today is no different. However, the reforms of today built on the reforms and conditions of yesterday, as varied as they are, do not seem to be improving education. Our leaders in government have many big ideas and many reforms have been implemented. These policy changes, curricular overhauls, the tests and accountability standards do little to affect the educational environment for individual students—those whom it is our charge to serve. Many of these reforms including voucher systems, proliferation of charter schools and privatization, may actually exacerbate the very issues they seek to correct. They seem to be geared more toward the adults involved than the children themselves. It is the children after all, our students, on whom we must focus. The resulting environment

that we have created does not seem to foster the kind of learning and academic success we wish to see and may actually create greater barriers and unnecessary obstacles for many students.

My project aims to address one of the problems with which our educational system in this country deals—the problem of personalization and support for students at a pivotal time in their schooling. For the last several years, educators throughout the country and world have been touting personalized education as a means to improve student performance and reduce the achievement gap. The problem with which educators continue to grapple is how to create a more personalized learning experience for each student within our monolithic, factory model of an educational system. I believe one potential solution is the development of site-based advisory programs. For this project I focus specifically on ninth grade, as it is such a pivotal year that can make or break a student's success in high school and beyond. To this end, the research question I will address in this paper is this: How can an advisory program be implemented into the structure of a large suburban high school to foster academic success in ninth-grade students?

<u>My Personal and Professional Experience</u>

Growing up, I accepted the structure of schooling as it was presented to me, as most people do. We accept our reality and rarely question or even understand our traditions, values or beliefs, especially those that seem fundamental. The adults in my life sold me the same product that was sold to them, the same product that has been passed down through generations. Our American compulsory education system has endured, largely without structural change, for over a century and with it the promise of success and

wellbeing for its students. The adults in my youth led me to understand that education is the gateway to success. Yet, in reality, school-defined success is rather narrow and does not lead to assured success outside of school. Ultimately, anyone can find success in school who understands and can "play the game." The game consists of following the rules, speaking when spoken to, sitting still for extended periods of time, producing the correct answer upon request, understanding what teachers want and then supplying the desired outcome. Schooling, to many, is this and little else.

In school I was a good student. In elementary school I could read early and well and my comprehension was far above most students my age. In middle school I excelled easily and did not have to try very hard to get good grades. I listened, I worked when I was supposed to, I could produce the correct reply on cue, and I tested well. In high school things went on this way at first. I found success and moved in a constant, upward arch toward achievement and prosperity. Then, in a moment, it all changed.

On an icy road, Thanksgiving night, 1996, I was involved in a head-on collision. Three other people were involved in the crash. I was the most severely hurt. I remember headlights. I remember standing outside looking at the scene. I remember coming home from the hospital and looking for our dog that we'd put down three weeks earlier; I had no recollection. I remember leaving home in tears to return to the hospital. All was not well. I had sustained a traumatic brain injury to the prefrontal cortex. I felt like a wreckage.

The prefrontal cortex is responsible for short-term memory, personality expression, the ability for abstract thought, and the processing of new information. All of these functions were devastated in one moment. After the accident I could no longer process

incoming information easily. I had virtually no short-term memory and little impulse control. The school elements that had once been so easy for me, the things I had taken for granted, had suddenly become nearly impossible. This was a traumatic experience to say the least. For me, at the time, it seemed that this current state would last forever. I was angry. I was afraid. It was as though when I collided with the other vehicle, everything, my intellect, my previous talents and abilities and my future potential came to a sudden and violent stop. This marked the beginning of the greatest existential crisis of my life.

It was at this time that I learned what it was like to have a learning disability. My struggle was new and it was a glaring reminder every day of what I had lost. Everything was difficult. I could make sense of nothing. Frustration and despair threatened to destroy me every moment of every day. However, it was also during this time that I experienced what it was like to get true and individualized support from adults around me. This made a huge difference.

Not long after the accident I was placed under the guidance of a special education teacher—whom I will refer to as Mr. J. I was not excited about the prospect. I was having enough trouble having fallen from high—I had been an honor student and was now, what exactly I could not say. I could not define myself and certainly did not want to be defined by someone else, and especially not in this way—as "special." I did not want the stigma associated with special education. But I had no choice in the matter of course and, I now see, that was certainly for the best.

Mr. J. got to know me, although I did not give him much. I wished to defy the placement, the status, and the stigma that came with it by disengaging. I would sit in the class. I would do my work. I would bother no one. I would refuse any offer of help,

support or guidance from Mr. J. The other students were amiable and welcoming. They had been a cohort for some time, yet they invited me in as a one of the group, but I did not want to be one of their group. I did not belong *there*. So, I rudely ignored them and used the time to struggle over my studies—an unintelligible assemblage of symbols and characters that baffled and frustrated me. I hid this from the group, tried to hide it from Mr J. and even from myself. Everything was fine. But it was not. Mr. J. knew this, and he offered help and support but did not push. He gave me the space I needed to adjust to this new setting and company. He gave me the space I needed to adjust to my new reality. Then he did something genius.

Knowing that I was protecting my ego, and in an attempt to stoke it, he made me the class expert in mathematics. From our brief interactions he knew that I still retained much of my old skill and knowledge—it was the new content with which I could not grapple. I had taken advanced mathematics, but the other students in the class were struggling with basic algebraic expressions. One afternoon when a student (I'll call him Brian) had a question about a problem, Mr. J. asked if I could help because he had to run and take care of something, or so he said. I made sure my annoyance was obvious, but I helped Brian. I knew the answer. It was easy. I helped him see that it was easy. And with that I was instantly empowered.

From then on, any time Mr. J. was busy with another student, which was often, the others students would seek me out with their math problems. It was not long before my feigned annoyance became genuine cordiality. I became part of the group then. It was all right for me to be a part of the group with this arrangement because I was able to maintain the feeling of superiority that was so precious to me at the time. I did not have

much; I needed that. It was not as though I used this status to degrade the other students, quite the opposite. Everyone involved benefitted from this arrangement. I was able to maintain what little self-respect I had and the other students benefitted from my help and knowledge. Mr. J. did not have to deal with my aloof, if not surly, attitude any longer. This situation also helped me feel comfortable accepting the help that Mr. J. had to offer, and although I pretended not to need help from anyone, I certainly did.

The point is that Mr. J. knew me. He knew what I needed and when I needed it. He took the time to know me as an individual with particular needs. What I have learned working in education is that every student has special needs. We cannot pretend that the majority of students are basically the same, needing similar support and attention. Everyone can benefit from individualized support from an adult. Without the support of Mr. J., I do not know where I would have ended up. I likely would have graduated, but I am not sure I would have had the confidence to attempt college. I may not have found much of the success I did after the accident, or learned how to fight through the hardest and most frustrating times. Mr. J. helped me through many situations and hardships and I fully believe I found the success I did largely, if not solely, due to his support.

It was teachers like Mr. J. and other significant educators in my years of school that led me to become a teacher. Each one affected me in a very personal way. They knew who I was, celebrated my talents, helped me to identify and work on the areas where I struggled. Each one of these people helped me to see the world in a new way and wanted me to find success and happiness in my life beyond their classroom. Soon, I wanted to do for others what they had done for me. I wanted to help young people find their way, to find their passions, their hidden talents. I wanted to help others broaden their minds and

prepare them for the world at large.

I went into education with all the idealism of youth, but it was not long before I was sobered to the realities of public education. When I began teaching I was under the impression, I think, that all educators, administrators, school boards, and community joined hands and worked together to teach our children right. Of course, there is no singular, absolute "right" way to teach children. There are as many approaches as there are teachers. While school leaders might have one idea about how to approach education, school board members have another. Teachers may believe in one pedagogical approach when education pundits push something diametrically opposed. It soon became clear that there was usually some outside force trying to dictate what happens in the classroom. The differing agendas and pedagogical beliefs tend to complicate the already messy process that is education.

I also quickly became aware of the issues that individual students face on a daily basis. I grew up in a middle class household. We lived paycheck to paycheck and we did not have great luxury, but as a child I wanted for nothing. I always had everything I needed and, like many young people, failed to understand that there are many other realities and many other struggles. I remember one colleague of mine early on saying to me, in the face of my frustration working with a particularly difficult student. "You can't save them all." This was hard for me to accept, but after a time it became an undeniable truth.

Students come to school with all the baggage of their lives. Some live in poverty, some are neglected at home, and some are abused. There are students who live lives of extreme excess and those who do not have a place to call home. Students come to us with

incredible talent, skills and confidence, while others are barely literate.

I now know that I cannot "save" everyone, nor is it our job as educators to save anyone. We can help them. We can help them learn, grow, and seek a better life, an improved reality than the one they may currently know. To do this we have to understand students in the context of their lives. We have to know them individually.

For me, the greatest problem in public education is how impersonal it can be. It seems to me that this problem outweighs the rest and that improving the impersonal nature of schooling would allow educators, to a greater ability, to help students succeed. Knowing students individually would better allow us to address issues with which they struggle in their personal lives whether that be poverty, other obligations to the family, neglect, mental health issues, etc. We cannot solve the problem of poverty or neglect, or any of the other systemic societal issues, but we can make a difference in the individual lives of students if we understand their struggles. This is why we must not allow students to be numbers or anonymous faces in the crowd. This is why we must know them as individuals. Based on my experience as a student and my experience in secondary education working with student populations ranging from the student who reads at a third grade level to the most skilled advanced placement seniors I have come to believe this: we need to support all of our students, to know them individually and personally so we can respond to their needs thereby improving students' ability to learn.

Education Today Does Not Reflect Student Needs

We certainly try to support our students. We have counselors, tracking programs, academic interventions, but in reality we cannot support students thoroughly with this type of mass approach so we focus on those with the most immediate needs leaving many

to fend for themselves. Students need individual and personal support directly from the adults in their school. Educators around the country are championing more student-centered classrooms and learning, and this is what we need—a more modern, student-centered approach to education.

To modernize education we must first understand the nature of the current state of education for we cannot change without first understanding the nature of what we do. Modern education was created during the industrial era when society needed a large workforce. We needed many workers and we needed them quickly. Public education was born from that need, and its construction and methodical structuring reflected the need as well. Society needed workers who could answer to authority, strive for efficiency, follow orders and meet the expectations of those in charge. Thus education prepared workers for work in mass production and life in a mass market.

Today (and for a long time now) society's needs have dramatically shifted. We are faced with global issues that can only be solved by creative people capable of critical thought, but because we are stuck in an industrial-style educational system, this is not what we are creating in our young people. Students need to be aided in the cultivation of critical thinking skills. They need to be given opportunities to be creative and imaginative. We need to foster in them authentic empowerment to be productive and active members in the democratic society in which they live. This will not only suit students better, but will also prepare them better to serve society as a whole. We need to engage students in democratic dialogue with and about democratic ideals, allow them authentic voice and true authority in their world if we want them to take ownership of it in the future. It is imperative that we do this.

<u>This lack is nothing new</u>. This alternate narrative is not new. Many reformers throughout history have suggested that our educational system is less than ideal. As far back as 1916 John Dewey and many of his progressive colleagues, championed a child-centered, naturalist learning approach to education. For Dewey, in his day, "traditional education [was] not just an ineffective method of instruction but one that was misdirected and damaging, by seeking to impose a fixed body of knowledge on the child at the will of the teacher attitudes remote from the child, and developed in motives alien to him" (Labaree, 2005, p. 284). Dewey was not alone. Other reformers, academics, teachers and even students have echoed these same ideas, yet little has changed. Our educational system, as large and impersonal as it is, cannot properly support student needs on an individual basis. We need to create a more personal and individualized environment for students to truly flourish. This growing belief backed by my observation, reading, research, conversations with teachers and students within the system has become the feature of my interest in educational research and leads to my central question of this research project: How can an advisory program be implemented into the structure of a large suburban high school to foster academic success in ninth grade students?

<u>A demographic shift</u>. The program I plan to outline in the following pages will be designed solely for the school in which I work. Our school is a large senior high school in in large Midwestern suburb housing approximately 1650 students and 170 faculty and staff. Our school has undergone a great transformation over its forty-year existence. When the school first opened the area was just being built up and enjoyed a very affluent cliental of mostly white children of middle to upper class families. The demographics in our district have changed dramatically. The homes in our surrounding community are

now among the oldest in the district and very little new residential construction is being done. As such, the older homes, costing less than new construction elsewhere naturally attract lower income families. In 2005, our school served just under 30% students of color and 19% of students were on our free and reduced lunch program. Last year our school was home to nearly 50% students of color and more than 40% of the student body were on free and reduced lunch. Our school employs approximately 170 faculty and staff members including teachers, administrators, clerical and support staff, aides and custodial staff, approximately 98% of whom are white, middle class adults.

These numbers are significant. Our school has undergone a rather rapid shift in demographic and our staff has struggled to adjust to the changes. We have tried to improve cultural awareness and sensitivity among our staff by providing professional development on culturally responsive pedagogy. With the racial and cultural composition of our students, this is something that needs to be done more often and effectively.

Working in our building for just over a decade I have been witness to this shift and the turmoil that has occurred as a result. Once, about five years ago, our now former principal stood in front of the staff at a faculty meeting and proclaimed that all the teachers in the room were racist. He had been involved in a conference on courageous conversations about race the previous summer and had received this message himself. The resistance to this message from the staff was immediate and disastrous. A number of teachers in the room chimed in and said they were offended by the remark and knew unequivocally that they were not racist. I understood his sentiment, but his approach was problematic. Privileged, white, middle class people struggle to understand their own privilege and the depth to which institutionalized and cultural racism runs in each of us.

This is a conversation that needs to be had, but also one that must be approached carefully. As white, privileged adults we are all racist on some level, but this is a difficult reality to grasp and certainly a difficult issue to converge upon with someone who is not prepared to hear or accept it. Yet, it is a hard truth.

In our school I have witnessed racism in many subtle ways. Teachers often unfairly target students of color when traversing the halls tending to approach students of color more readily and more often than they do our white students. I have heard teachers blame parents of black students for their failing grades or questionable behavior opining that if parents would just support their kids more, or be home more, or if they just exhibited a value for education at home, then these students would do better in school. Teachers have complained to me that black students are just so loud, or overly emotional, or will not stop moving in class. These actions and comments display at worst overt racism and at best a terrible misunderstanding of the cultural heritage of our students.

If we are talking about personalization and understanding students individually then we must also understand their cultural heritage. Thus, the success of this advisory program will depend on professional development. We must understand our students as completely as possible. This requires a cultural understanding as much as is relies on understanding on an interpersonal level.

A focus on STEM. Along with professional development focused on culturally responsive pedagogy our school also has a significant need for teacher training related to STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) education. Over just the last three years our school has begun the process of becoming a STEM high school. We were awarded a substantial federal grant to begin STEM programming and from there we have started to

change the fabric of our building by making a shift to STEM thinking, building the ideas of STEM education into all areas and disciplines. As with any major change this one has been a difficult one for our staff. There are many misconceptions among our faculty related to STEM and how it might affect our staff, students, course offerings and curricula. There is significant need to provide continued professional development to help our staff gain comfort with this change and to help them build STEM ideals into their classrooms.

With a shift toward STEM focused education there is also a shift in mindset that needs to occur in students just as much as in the adults in the building. STEM learning is a different kind of learning than what our students have experienced in the past. It is much more student centered, inquiry based. STEM learning requires creative, out of the box, interdisciplinary thinking. It is more of a process of trial and error (and try again). An advisory can help students develop the needed mindset for "doing school" and can help them cope with and navigate the rigor of a STEM high school education. The potential benefits are great for our students, teachers and others as well.

There are many individuals who could potentially benefit from an advisory program at our school. Beneficiaries of such a program include all stakeholders from those who have a direct and daily connection like current students and staff, to individuals who are more on the periphery including parents and community members.

Significance to Various Stakeholders

This research question is of great importance to all involved in secondary education from the students and staff who currently spend their days in our school, to families of potential students, to the those in our immediate community and could even have an

impact on educational policy throughout the district and beyond. If we are to move forward in a positive way in our building we must scrutinize our current practice, avoid being guided by tradition and meet our students where they are individually. I believe we are currently doing a disservice to our students by not properly supporting them when they enter into the high school experience.

This certainly has a widespread significance to the individuals involved in education (including teachers and students), to the educational leaders and policy makers, parents, and even those not directly related to, working in and around, education. The education of our children is a societal concern. Done well or done badly the results will reverberate loudly through our culture and society. Done well or done badly the results will most certainly affect the current and future lives of our students and our society.

Significance to policy makers. If we can properly support our high school students and help send them on their way to find greater success, then this could help inform new and positive educational policy instead of simply perpetuating current, age-old practices. This could also lead to other research in the area and further ignite discussion and more accurately inform policy. Identifying the effects of current practice and policy in high school education can lead us to better policy initiatives.

Significance to educators. Many educators are searching for ways to improve their practice and help students learn. If we could identify the practices that are most helpful in personalizing the experience and supporting our ninth grade students we could help educators identify and reform current practices and remove some of the great barriers to learning. This work, if successful, could inform other educators and aid them in creating

a more successful practice in their classrooms and schools and possibly help them construct better learning environments for their students leading to greater overall results.

   Significance to parents. As a parent myself I want to make sure that the experience my daughter has is a positive one. I want to be sure that her education is, in fact, liberating and does not hinder her intellectual and social development, either intentionally or unintentionally. I am sure that any parent would agree. If this work could help to ensure that our children are supported in a healthy and positive way in an environment that responds to and supports them then this research could also empower parents to improve education for their own children by helping to push and inform effective and healthy educational policy for their children.

   Significance to students. Of course, the practices of a successful advisory could be tailored to other levels of education as well. The fact that I have chosen to focus on ninth grade is significant, but that does not mean these practices are exclusive only to high school freshmen. On the contrary, good, respectful practice, personalization, humanization, support—all things that advisory brings—could potentially benefit other students at many, if not all, other levels of schooling as well.

   One of the issues in education that I have uncovered is the lack of student voice in education. If nothing else, since we are in the business of fostering not only learning in the moment but also cultivating lifelong learners, we need to be sure the educational environment that we create for students is a positive and healthy one that truly responds to their needs as learners. Education should reflect and be fashioned with the learners in mind.

Summary

Like most people who grew up in the United States and elsewhere I was educated in the traditional, compulsory, public education system. And like most people who grew within the system I was largely unable to see its faults while immersed in it as a student, and later as a teacher, in a public school. My experience tells me that we are not properly supporting students like we should—like we could—with our educational policy and practice. This is of course anecdotal, subjective, and does not necessarily create great basis for truth. In the rest of this paper I will pull together evidence and the ideas and experience of some of the experts in education (including the teachers in our building and others who work in other schools with advisory programs) in order to identify the best way to support incoming freshmen students to help set them on the path to success. I will also draw directly on my experience.

A number of years ago a small group of devoted teachers and I fronted an initiative, put in a great deal of hours, and piloted an advisory program at the high school where we work. Unfortunately, the program was dismantled halfway through our school year for reasons I will discuss in a later chapter. So, this project is based on a failed attempt, but as educators know we can learn a great deal from our failures. I will use our failed attempt as a foundation for this project—designing an advisory program for ninth graders in a large, Midwestern, suburban high school—and build upon our successes and analyze our faults to inform this new design.

This project will potentially benefit many stakeholders, for if we can identify the positive effects on students, pinpoint some of the practices and structures that are most helpful, we can then move to change them and improve the educational process for all

involved, thereby improving the lives of individuals and society by extension. Chapter two will include a literature review of some of the major research related to the need for increased support for incoming freshman students and the benefits of such support in their academic lives.

In chapter two I will lay out my literature review where I will examine the various aspects of my project and the need for a more supportive and personalized experience for high school students. I will address some of the overarching problems that exist in high school and some potential solutions. I will discuss the need to focus specifically on ninth grade and outline many of the issues that ninth graders face in the transition to high school and how an advisory program can be one way to combat these issues and help students succeed.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Overview of the High School Problem

In high schools throughout the country, graduation rates are poor. Students are not graduating at rates they should be. While graduation rates have improved over the last decade, the nation is still sitting at a 6.6% dropout rate for all races (Fry, 2013; U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 2013)—that is approximately 2.2 million students across the country (Fry, 2013). This is problematic for many reasons. As McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) point out, individuals who lack a high school diploma have trouble finding work that pays above minimum wage. Anything at or slightly above minimum wage today is not a livable wage for an individual, let alone a family. If our nation is failing to graduate more than two million students annually, we are not helping enough of our students be successful. When we take into account that the graduation rates for students of low socioeconomic background and minority students may top out around 50%, it might be accurate to say schools are not preparing students to find success (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007).

Today, the emphasis on earning a high school diploma is but the first step in becoming a financially independent individual, able to participate in the global economy and perform a civic duty (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007). If students are dropping out of high school and not earning a diploma, they will be at a great disadvantage for the rest of their lives. It is fundamental to our charge as educators to help as many of our students as we can. In order to help them, we must first understand where their problems originate. Policymakers and educators have historically viewed school dropouts with equal parts

understanding and perplexity. "On the one hand, they view it as predictable, given the high dropout rates in certain demographic categories and geographic locations. At the same time, they view the experiences that precede a specific student's dropping out as mysterious, difficult to predict, and idiosyncratic" (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007, p. 28). In reality, educational policy makers and educators have been searching for and trying to fix the problems of public school since its establishment.

Concern is Not New

Ever since the inception of the United States public school system, the nation's citizens, teachers, school and political leaders, have been working to shape and improve it. There have been many school reform initiatives throughout the storied history of the United States.

Over the last few decades we have put forth many major reform efforts to curb the varied problems that exist in education from poor test scores to graduation rates to the achievement gap. The reform efforts, some of the current issues and educational landscape of our modern era can be traced back to A Nation at Risk (ANAR) in 1983, followed by the No Child Left Act (NCLB) of 2001, the Obama administration's Race to The Top (RTTT) in 2009, and the most current reform effort, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). With these reforms the education industry has attempted to solve the problems of public education. Through ANAR, The National Commission on Excellence in Education, led by Terrel Bell, worked to identify the problems in public high school education and articulate the dangers of allowing them to go unchecked. George W. Bush's NCLB worked to place a greater emphasis on college and career readiness and created accountability measures for teachers, administrators and schools. President

Obama's RTTT effectively increased accountability measures and similar policies championed by NCLB. And with the CCSS the U.S. Department of Education is currently attempting to overhaul standards by unifying and centralizing control of those standards under the federal government to set and coordinate common standards across the nation. The problem is, these reforms and policies have not effectively curbed the many problems of our public education system. In some cases they may have actually exacerbated many of the problems they were created to thwart.

  <u>Focus on the high school experience</u>. The seemingly inherent problems of the American high school have not been alleviated by the many years of effort put into the cause. American education still suffers from significant educational gaps between white and minority students. Colleges continually complain that students are entering postsecondary education ill prepared for the work and rigor that await them. Students leave high school poorly suited to join the workforce and often have to be trained in the most basic of skills. It would seem that our past and present methods are not suited to the job.

  High schools were designed for a very different time with a very different purpose. The world of today has transformed significantly from the world for which the American schooling system was devised. Therefore reform may not be the answer to our problems. Many purport that the time for reform has passed and that it is now time for redesign (McNeil, 2003; Adams, 2013; DiMartini & Miles, 2006). Today high schools need to be training skilled thinkers and problem solvers able to adapt to new situations and approach ideas that have never been attempted before. We are preparing students for a world that is increasingly undefined. High schools today need to be prepared to provide

real world experience to students and not just a theoretical picture of what it might look like to play a part in society today. Students should be connecting to the outside community and solving real problems. This is not necessarily what students do in most public high schools today.

My concern is less in the preparation for life outside of the schooling—as this is the purpose of high school entire and is far too involved to be fixed within the scope of my project. I am concerned rather in the preparation and the fostering of success within the school, supporting and aiding incoming ninth grade students in their endeavors. If the goal is to increase the number of high school graduates, then we must help students find greater success within their high school experience. If the goal is to create skilled thinkers and problem-solvers, lifelong learners and active, conscientious citizens, then I think the same applies. Both of these goals are necessary and a successful secondary school experience is, I contend, an essential factor in either scenario.

It also seems appropriate to begin at the beginning—with incoming freshmen. There is a great deal of research devoted to the importance of the ninth grade experience and the integral part that this first year plays in the overall success of students throughout a high school career. There seems to be a discernable problem for ninth grade students almost universally. The number of students who enter high school as ninth graders decreases significantly by the time graduation time rolls around (Adams, 2013). Ninth grade is a critical time, maybe the most critical, in a student's high school career (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Bottoms, 2008; Creamer, 2006; Ellerbrock and Kiefer, 2014).

The need to focus on ninth grade. For many students ninth grade is the first time their grades will begin to count on their academic record. In middle school or junior high, students often advance even if they fail courses or entire grade levels. It is rare to find a middle school holding students back. This practice is often called social promotion. The thought behind it is that it can protect the child from undue social and emotional stress that may occur if a student was retained (Lynch, 2013, p. 294).

Thus, high school, for many students is the first time that grades matter. That is a difficult shift to make and it needs to be made almost immediately once a student enters high school. There is very little room for error, considering the way we calculate grades and the importance that is placed on grade point average (GPA). Some students can make this shift without a problem, but many have understandable difficulty adapting to this new, more rigorous reality.

If a ninth grade student earns low marks or fails a course it will significantly and negatively affect his GPA and, because of the way a GPA is calculated, it is very difficult to repair once the damage has been done. Considering the importance of doing well academically in high school, this can be very detrimental if a student starts out with a poor performance.

It is also true that in ninth grade most students will be faced with increased demands, including greater independence and more rigorous coursework than anything they have seen before. According to McCallumore & Sparapani (2010), for these reasons, and others, "ninth-graders have the lowest grade point average, the most missed classes, the majority of failing grades, and more misbehavior referrals than any other high school grade level" (p. 448). This is significant when taken into account that, according to

Willens (2013), "in 1970, there were 3 percent fewer tenth graders than ninth graders; by 2000, that share had risen to 11 percent" (para. 1). In high school, unlike middle school, students will be held back and have to repeat courses (often with younger students) if they fail and "a disproportionate number of students who are held back in ninth grade subsequently drop out" (Willens, 2013, para. 6).

Problems That Ninth Grade Students Face

Life-course changes. The move from eighth to ninth grade is a major transition. "Not only are youths entering the intimidating institution that is high school, they are experiencing the usual adolescent angst and depending on poor decision-making skills" (Willens, 2013, para. 3). Students are not only faced with new academic hardships including more difficult courses and a greater homework load, they also struggle with many social concerns like bullying and acceptance (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). As Neild (2009) puts it, "The first, or developmental, argument holds that ninth grade coincides with life-course changes that are independent of the structure or academic requirements of schooling itself" (Nield, 2009, p. 58). Studies have shown that parents begin to give their children more freedom when they enter high school, thinking that the amount of freedom should coincide with this movement into adolescence, but "the reduction of parental supervision and support, accompanied by the increase in peer influence that characterizes adolescence, may result in increased risk-taking behaviors and declining academic performance.

A study by Christopher Weiss and Peter Bearman (2007) provides good national evidence of the increase in drinking, smoking, and drug use between eighth and ninth grade" (Nield, 2009, p. 58). At the same time, Robert Epstein (2010) surmises that it is

the existence of the adolescent mentality itself that might be the problem. Epstein has shown that the construct of adolescence is largely a western phenomenon and does not exist in other parts of the world nor did it exist in earlier iterations of U.S. society. Epstein contends that it is this creation of an adolescent mentality that sets kids up to struggle with anxiety and poor decision making.

Pair this with Weiss and Bearman's (2007) findings and you have the makings of a disaster. Pre-adolescents are hovered over until the start of ninth grade when parents take a step back, allowing their children greater autonomy without helping them to sufficiently build the skills to handle this autonomy. Add other pressures from peers, society, schoolwork and the like, and we begin to see how stressful it can be at this juncture in student life.

More autonomy and more challenging graduation requirements are certainly part of the equation ninth grade demands, but there are other issues as well. "There has been a lot of research done to pinpoint exactly why students have so much trouble during the ninth-grade year, and most research points to one overarching problem," which seems to be the transition itself wherein as many as 40% of students suffer serious problems in some form or another after the transition to high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 449). Willens (2013) argues that this time of transition is a developmental milestone in a sense. "It's a time when the cognitive, emotional, and physical are all coming together. The schools are likely new environments, and the students have more autonomy and more homework" (Willens, 2013, para. 2). This transitional period, according to McCallumore & Sparapani (2010), can be, and is often, a time "masked with feelings of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection. Coming from a smaller-sized middle

school to a larger-sized high school can be overwhelming for students" (p. 449). Leaving a place of familiarity can result in the breaking of trusting attachments with teachers and peers and traversing new, unfamiliar and intimidating territory with new routines, rules and practices, and the challenge of forming new relationships.

These challenges can present in different ways: including a decline in classroom performance, behavioral and attendance issues (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Nield, 2009). In many cases, students who are unsuccessful in making a smooth transition may begin to drop out as early as the end of ninth grade (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). It is clear that something must be done to help students make this transition easier, smoother, and more successful. According to Bottoms (2008) improving this transition can help improve student achievement and "improving student achievement in the ninth grade can lead to improved graduation rates and improved readiness for college and careers" (p. 1).

High school organization and climate. Neild (2009) contends that the organization of the school itself may play a part in the difficulty some students face in the transition to ninth grade. Most high schools are organized traditionally. Disciplines are compartmentalized. Each class period is 45-60 minutes in length and the end of each period marks the end of the study of a discipline. Many students from elementary through middle school experienced a much more interdisciplinary structure. In this traditional high school structure we find that "teachers' primary allegiance is to subject-matter departments and students are hurried from one class period to another [and this] can leave students feeling anonymous and alienated" (Nield, 2009, p. 61).

In such a structure, with such allegiance, teachers tend be alienated as well remaining in their own departments focusing strictly on their own discipline and their own individual classes with no reason, incentive or even opportunity, to find out how individual students are doing in their other classes. So, students are passed around from teacher to teacher and from discipline to discipline. The result is that no single person seems to know how an individual student is doing in her classes (Neild, 2009). Neild (2009) also shows some surprising findings related to students who found success in the eighth grade and how that carried over or not, for many, into ninth grade.

As you would expect, "data from large cities show that students with weaker grades and test scores are more likely to get off track in ninth grade" (Neild, 2009, p. 61). However, there appeared to be a rather large number of struggling ninth graders who tested at or above grade level and exhibited few or none of the telltale tendencies in eight grade that you would expect including many who had no course failings or poor attendance. For example, "in Chicago, a student who was two years above grade level in reading or mathematics had approximately a 25 percent chance of ninth-grade course failure or dropout" (Neild, 2009, p. 61). And likewise in Philadelphia, "about 30 percent of eventual dropouts were students who, despite having no failing grades in core courses and reasonably good attendance in eighth grade, earned few credits or became so disengaged with school that they attended less than 70 percent of the time in ninth grade" (Nield, 2009, p. 61).

Such statistics may suggest that past success is not as strong an indicator of success in the ninth grade as we would assume. It may also point to other factors leading to difficulty for ninth grade students. If students who have often, or always, enjoyed

success in earlier grades begin to fail in ninth grade it may certainly point a negative impact of the school climate and/or organization on otherwise successful students. According to Neild (2009), a 2009 study suggested that in schools that were more communally organized that emphasized the importance of teacher-student relationships, there were greater instances of success among students entering ninth grade. The opposite was true in more traditional, hierarchically organized, and less personal schools. "The relationships between these school climate variables and student outcomes remained after statistically controlling for characteristics of students —including prior achievement levels and family socioeconomic status—that are known to be related to a more positive school climate" (Nield, 2009, p. 63).

Recently, there has been a shift toward smaller, more personalized and student-centered schools or, in the case of larger schools, smaller learning communities of students within the larger structure. Smaller learning communities can help students to feel less anonymous and more like they belong (Adams, 2013; Neild, 2009). Also according to Adams (2013), school leaders are finding "when they make an effort to seek input from students, the students often are more connected to the school and less likely to drop out. Through advisory classes or cohort groupings, redesign often includes an emphasis on building close relationships so students know a caring adult in the building" (Adams, 2013, p. 5).

Success in Ninth Grade Leads to Success in the Future

All over the country researchers and educators are looking for answers to age-old questions: how can we engage students? How can we keep them from dropping out? How can we inspire them to do their best work? How can we help students be successful

throughout their high school experience and beyond? "In looking for answers, educators are paying particular attention to ninth grade. This is considered the most difficult transition year in the public education system, where problems emerge for many kids as they move to large, impersonal campuses" (Creamer, 2006, para. 10).

Ninth grade seems to be the magical year where a student's future is all but set. If students can be successful in ninth grade, they have much greater chance of graduating a successful high school student and later becoming successful at college, university, or in a chosen career field. But how can we inspire students to work for these goals from the start? As Bottoms (2008) points out, "students cannot be forced to exert the effort to succeed; they must be inspired to do so. Inspiration may come from a personal ambition, but for a rising number of students, this inspiration must come from the school" (p. 3). Thus the teachers' and the schools' job is not only to educate, but also to inspire students to learn.

According to Bottoms (2008) students will be inspired to make the effort to succeed when they have the following in place: 1) goals and purposes for their education; 2) personal ambition developed through exploring career and educational options; 3) personal responsibility or a sense of their own value from the relationships developed with adults at their school through the teacher-adviser program; 4) clearly defined standards for high-quality work and adequate support to achieve these standards; 5) excitement in the learning process and an understanding of the relevance of curricular content and skills to their future. The following is one way that these goals can be met.

Teacher-student advisory. One option that can be created to support students through this difficult transition and, therefore, help them find greater success in ninth

grade and beyond is the Teacher-Student Advisory. Such an advisory program is not new, but has been implemented in many schools throughout the nation and world. An advisory program is designed to support students academically, socially, and emotionally. Typically, advisory is structured time during the school day where special activities and perhaps curricula are implemented to help students gain the skills necessary to navigate their way through the eighth to ninth grade transition and hone these skills to help them continue to find success in the years to come.

Advisory groups can be organized as cohorts consisting of different grade levels intermixed or single grade level wherein ninth grade students are grouped together, tenth grade students are grouped together and so on. An advisory can be something that only occurs in the ninth grade (or another grade), or it can last throughout a student's high school career where the cohort stays together for the duration with the same teacher. Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2010) call this a *community of care,* "defined as a school culture in which students and teachers care about and support each other, individuals' needs are satisfied within a group setting, and members feel a sense of belonging and identification with the group" (p. 403). It is important for students to feel that they belong, that they are known. This can be difficult, especially in large high schools consisting of hundreds or thousands of students.

DiMartino and Miles (2006) contend that, "strong evidence suggests that if students perceive they are known by an adult in the school and if the school has a supportive environment, then the students will tend to have better attendance and be less likely to drop out than those who do not feel an attachment to school personnel" (p. 27). A successful advisory can help create a small learning community of close-knit

individuals inside a much larger institution and this can, to borrow a phrase from

Creamer (2006), "counteract the anonymity of large high schools" (para. 21). This we

must do if we want to help students be successful in high school. They can no longer be

numbers or data points. We must counteract the anonymity of the large high school

experience and help students feel known and cared for, supported and thus empowered.

"Sometimes," according to DiMartino and Miles (2006), "it just takes that one person to

follow up with and look after a student to make a difference in that student's success" (p.

27).

<u>Need for Professional Development</u>

       <u>Our school's particular needs</u>. As stated in chapter one, our school has undergone

a very significant shift in demographics over the last decade. Currently, our school's

student population is nearly 50% students of color, but our staff is 98% white. This poses

a significant challenge for our school. My research implies that in order to help our

students find and continue to have success, they must develop connection to our school

and the people in it. The problem for us is that the staff of our school struggle to connect

with our student body due to cultural and racial divides.

       <u>Cultural competency.</u> As educators we must work toward cultural competency. In

October 2014, eleven civil rights groups including NAACP, National Urban League,

Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, and others came together and offered

the Obama administration their recommendations for education reforms. One of these

recommendations spoke specifically to the need to train teachers and even incentivize

continued, professional development work toward cultural competency. "Systems of

preparation and ongoing development should ensure that educators have the time,

investments, and supports necessary to acquire the knowledge about curriculum,

teaching, assessment, linguistic and cultural competence, implicit bias, and student

support needed to teach students effectively" (National Opportunity to Learn Campaign,

2014, p. 10). As these groups point out, this work should be part of any teacher

preparation program, and must also be ongoing. In my experience, it seems that many

educators resist this work, claiming they do not need it because they are not racist, but the

need is most certainly there and the need is great.

We all have unseen biases deep in our unconscious that are culturally ingrained in

us (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013; Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015; Vilson, 2015). These

biases are difficult to see unless we work very hard to uncover them. With them,

however, our staff (myself included) will always struggle to connect with our students of

color. Not only that, but because our staff is made up of an overwhelming majority of

white, privileged adults, this is the overarching culture represented at our school. This

fact, of course, makes it difficult for our students to find positive reinforcement of their

culture and identity, which is necessary for them to view our building as inclusive and to

feel themselves included in the make-up of the school. For this reason we have to

include, as part of this plan, professional development that will challenge our teachers

and administrators to look at their own biases related to race and culture and examine

school policy that might be racially and culturally biased. We can also use these skills

and knowledge to help inform the creation of our advisory.

Vilson (2015) makes the point that students of color and marginalized cultures

have to learn to navigate the world of white dominant culture. "Our students have to

survive in the same world as everyone else. A small part of me also thinks: Who better to

teach students of color the tools needed to survive in a predominantly white country than white people?" (Vilson, 2015, p. 27). At the same time, students of color need to be able to see themselves reflected in the people who are charged with educating them. There is something fundamental about that connection of experience living as a marginalized person that people of the dominant culture just cannot understand (hooks, 1994; Vilson, 2015). The reality is that our systems—our justice system, our economic system, our system of schooling—are stacked against our students of color. "The quality of education that most African American children receive today is far below that of most white American children" (Hale, 2010, p. 111). This is plainly evident in this perpetual existence of an educational achievement gap.

White teachers cannot truly understand the experience or relate to students of color like they can to students of the same or similar race and culture. There is a depth of empathy that one can only reach when living on a certain side of life, when viewing the world through a similar set of eyes, from a similar vantage point. Simply put, white teachers, though they may try, cannot truly understand the experience of our students of color, but we can work to draw nearer to that understanding.

Likewise, students of color cannot relate to their teachers when it is obvious their teachers do not share their perspective and have not experienced the micro aggressions a person of color experiences every day. It is partly because of this divide between teacher and pupil that the process of learning is thwarted for marginalized students, but there are other factors that lead to this race-based, educational achievement gap as well.

For adolescents the timing of the middle to high school transition is also marked cognitively by a period of identity development which can be a very challenging time for

young people as they try to understand their place in the world (French, Seidman & Allen, 2000). For many students of color this transition may also be a critical time for racial/ethnic identity development and may for many be a time that brings about an ,in this development a "stage during which a traumatic, racially prejudiced event occurs that shakes people from their original view so that they may be receptive to a new interpretation of their racial/ethnic identity" (French, Seidman & Allen, 2000, p. 588). The turmoil of movement from middle school to high school is characterized by major changes in relationships and setting and may, for young people of marginalized groups, prove to be a period where they become aware of the prejudice that exists in society as the schooling system tends to be a microcosm of our greater society. There is little room for doubt that our system of education is, like most systems in our white empowered society, also rife with institutionalized racism and with that it makes sense that this is period is an even greater struggle for our marginalized students. There is very little research specifically on the effects of the middle school to high school transition on students of color to date (French, Seidman & Allen, 2000).

The school to prison pipeline is a phrase often used today to describe the increased likelihood of students of color, especially when compared to white, affluent students, to have contact with the criminal justice system and potentially end up incarcerated as adults. This trend may begin in school. "The manners in which many high schools are constituted (e.g., course scheduling, teacher assignment, and discipline procedures) unite structures, practices, and outcomes that reproduce the inequalities that exist in the surrounding social, economic, and political milieu" (Heck and Mahoe, 2006, p. 420). According to Heck and Mahoe (2006), the school is a microcosm of greater

society rife with all the same injustices and inequalities found in the greater world. If the school is no different and is just as aloof, or even seemingly opposed, to their existence they are of course likely to rebel and resist the structures that resist them.

Many of our students of color lose hope in a future because society seems to say people of color have little possibility for a future that does not include poverty or incarceration. "Children who cannot conceptualize a future for themselves do not have the motivation to defer the gratification found in premature sexual activity or substance abuse (Hale, 2010, p. 113). Boys especially are encouraged to take physical risks beginning at an early age, a tendency that is reinforced by society, culture and even parents themselves. Later in life this can translate to a other risky behaviors including drugs and criminal activity. The likelihood of this increases more when young men, especially young black men, believe they have no choices, no future and no hope (Canada, 2000; Hale, 2010; Heck and Mahoe, 2006). Within the school, another institutional system, some groups of students may resist the policies, structures and experiences offered to them, responding instead with defiance and misconduct. "For these students, resistance can become a coping strategy resulting from prolonged interaction with the system and disempowerment from their schools" (Heck and Mahoe, 2006, p. 420). These tendencies can result in an increased likelihood of dropping out of school.

Many students of marginalized groups may also struggle to connect or communicate their emotions or manage them in healthy ways. As many students of color see the system stacked against them and come to understand that there are few (in some cases none at all) who can understand them, their frustration and defiance are likely to

grow. "Most African American children, particularly African American males, do not like school. Many drop out intellectually by the time they are in the fifth grade and make it legal at sixteen years of age" (Hale, 2010, p. 113). In that time these young men are also struggling with an inability to talk about their feelings as society has made it taboo for young men to discuss or even have such feelings.

Geoffrey Canada (2000) asks, "How do we get boys to remain in touch with their feelings? How can we ensure that adults in their lives are compassionate and skilled at talking with them and listening to them during this crucial period? When the answer is no one, we must find the right people to fill that void" (p. 15). This is where a school advisory can have a great effect on students of color in particular, but to do so teachers must be brought to understand these students' reality and gain a familiarity and compassion for their cultural experience. For some teachers, this does not come naturally and may only come with hard work through difficult feelings and even more difficult conversations and intense professional development.

It may also be a lot to ask that teachers to bear all the weight of this endeavor and may be unfair to our students of color to assume that they can. Most teachers are part of the dominant race and culture and to assume that we can move all of them to the point that they can come to terms with their own privilege as part of the dominant culture, to gain as complete an understanding that they need in order to provide the support that our students of color truly need and then gain the skills enough to provide the appropriate support to those students in any short period of time is a stretch to say the least. Many teachers understand these realities and are ready and willing to do the work necessary to bridge the gap of understanding and compassion. Many are not ready or willing to do this

work, or worse, assume that they do not need to do this work at all. We cannot expect a complete revolution in attitudes and skills in short period of time. Therefore an advisory program should also make use of mentors from the outside community who can better relate to our marginalized students. This could be done by way of mentorships, guest speakers, tutors, and volunteers brought in who can work with our students and, if nothing else, can provide another face that reflects their own, another heart that beats to the same cultural beat, another sameness of soul to which these students can relate.

It is precisely for this reason that we, as teachers living as part of the dominant culture, need to work to understand. We need to challenge ourselves to learn what we can about the cultures and lives in which our students live if we want to enrich their lives. Hooks (1994) tells us that "to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (p. 13). This is precisely what this project is about—creating the conditions necessary to educate students to the best of our ability. An advisory can certainly be a significant part of this, but without a complete understanding of the students in our care, we cannot truly provide them with the support and education they need. Therefore, professional development toward culturally responsive teaching is fundamental to our goal and must be part of this advisory program.

STEM ideals. Along with our shift in student demographic, our school has also begun to undertake another major shift in educational philosophy and practice. Over the last three years our institution has been slowly integrating STEM ideals and practices into our school and curricula. Change is hard for educators as many reforms have come and gone with little, actual change to show for the effort. So, understandably, many educators

are skeptical of change and therefore, professional development around STEM education is very necessary for our teachers.

The acronym "STEM" is a bit of a misnomer in that it implies that the educational focus is strictly on the four named areas in the acronym—science, technology, mathematics and science. Many teachers in our school, especially those in the humanities (language arts, social studies, etc.) and in our elective areas (art, band, etc.) have struggled to accept STEM as an educational approach, thinking it is in opposition to the arts. STEM, in fact, is more a way of thinking, teaching and learning than it is a focus on any set of disciplines or areas of study. It is in many ways this shift in thinking that people struggle with the most.

In our school we have adopted the ideas of Carol Dweck, Professor of Psychology at Stanford University and author of *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. In her work, Dweck (2008) explains and promotes the move from a pervasive, fixed mindset to what she calls a growth mindset. A fixed mindset views intelligence as finite, as something that you either have or you do not. A growth mindset views intelligence as something that can be developed, expanded, and that can always be improved with hard work and dedication. Having a growth mindset can have a very positive effect on achievement. "Students who believe (or are taught) that intellectual abilities are qualities that can be developed (as opposed to qualities that are fixed) tend to show higher achievement across challenging school transitions" (Yeager & Dweck, 2012, p. 302). So, it is of great benefit to work to develop a growth mindset and this has become something of an educational movement over the last decade. Adopting a growth mindset is liberating and empowering for individuals. "When you enter a mindset, you enter a new world. In

one world — the world of fixed traits — success is about proving you're smart or talented. Validating yourself. In the other — the world of changing qualities — it's about stretching yourself to learn something new. Developing yourself" (Dweck, 2008, p. 15).

STEM education can be defined as "a standards-based, meta-discipline residing at the school level where all teachers, especially science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) teachers, teach an integrated approach to teaching and learning, where discipline-specific content is not divided, but addressed and treated as one dynamic, fluid study" (Merrill, 2009). STEM is focused on creative problem solving, collaboration, inquiry and student-driven questions. It is believed by many that STEM thinking "can contribute to increased problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and analytical thinking in students as well as lead to better real-world connections in the curriculum" (Brown, 2011, p. 5). To put it simply, STEM education is good, student-centered, interdisciplinary teaching and learning. Teachers need professional development to help aid them in this shift in pedagogical approach. As our school is building its focus on STEM, the design of this advisory program will incorporate the components of STEM education and focus on our STEM related building goals helping to build a foundation for students as they enter into our building and supporting our school's conceptual cohesion as a STEM institution.

Our school has identified the following goals as part of our formation of a STEM focused school. 1) Prepare students for the world beyond; 2) Reduce, Eliminate or Prevent Racial/Gender/Cultural Disproportionalities; 3) Improve Student Achievement, 4) Provide Professional Development that Improves Instructional Pedagogy; 5) Establish Access to 21st Century Facilities & Technology; and 6) Strengthen District STEM

Corridor & Partnerships. An advisory program should support the schools collective

vision, goals and philosophical beliefs. The advisory program I will build will do this

very thing and will be outlined in chapter four.

Summary

Change, reform, and redesign must be genuine and truly in the best interest of

students. As Bottoms (2008) puts it, "going through the redesign process in name only

will not change student achievement. Rather, schools must commit time, resources and

effort to improve the quality of instruction and provide the support students need to

succeed" (para. 6). It is important to take the time to consider what students need in an

individual context, community and school. Just as each individual student is different, so

are the specific needs of an individual school community.

I plan to take into account the specific needs of our school community and focus

on the three indicators, "attendance, behavior, and course performance—that are believed

to be the most accurate measurements of a student's likelihood to either quit school or

move on" (Willens, 2013, para. 6). I will also take into account Bottoms' five factors to

inspire students to put forth the effort needed to succeed (outlined above). Using these

ideas as a base I will also identify significant goals that are the most appropriate for our

school and students, and build an advisory program around them taking into account

research that has been done in the past around advisory programs to cull out the best and

tailor them to our needs.

In chapter three I will discuss my research methods. I will explain the research

paradigm and outline the methods and tools I will use to gather data to inform this

project. I will also introduce the setting and demographics of the school in which this

project will occur.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

<u>Overview</u>

The purpose of this project is to design an ideal teacher/student advisory program for high school freshmen (ninth grade) students in a large, suburban, Midwestern, senior high school. Research indicates that high schools have historically struggled with dropout rates and graduating students with an academic record respectable enough to earn a place in university or in the work force. High schools have also struggled to prepare students for the rigor of college or university learning or train them properly for the professionalism and work ethic required in the workforce. Decades of work have gone into righting the wrongs of the American high school, yet students still struggle to graduate, to make it through school with a respectable academic record, to get out of high school what is intended—a well-rounded education helping to prepare them for higher education (if they so choose) and to be successful, well-adjusted contributors to civic life.

American education has a long history of difficulty meeting its goals with a list of movements and reforms to match. The recent educational landscape has changed in many ways since the publishing of the A Nation at Risk (ANAR) in 1983. In the forty years since ANAR, education has grown more centralized in control and standardized in nature marked by key reforms including No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top (RTTT), and currently, Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Each one of these initiatives has raised the bar on centralization of educational control and standardization of curricula. None of them has successfully done much to remedy the struggles with which teachers and students experience. Schools need to take matters into their own

hands to create programing and design pedagogy that is right for their individual students and individual needs.

This project will address the issue of academic success in the high school setting related to the experience and support of ninth grade students transitioning from eighth grade. My research indicates that the current trends in education practice are not meeting the needs of our ninth grade high school students successfully enough to support them through what is often a tumultuous transition into this new, and in many ways, challenging and truly consequential educational experience. The research also suggests that ninth grade is a key year that can determine a high school student's success. One potential solution to these problems is to implement a teacher-student advisory program to help support students through this transitional period and position them for success in the years to come. I intend to address the question: How can an advisory program be implemented into the structure of a large suburban high school to foster academic success in ninth-grade students? This chapter will address the setting, the various participants who will be involved, procedures and tools for data collection that will be used in conducting this research project, and the process I will undertake to design an advisory program appropriate to fit the needs of students in our particular school.

Research Paradigm

Although the general research paradigm for this project will be qualitative in nature I will be using a mixed methods approach for this study. The question deals with affective domain (attitudes, values, perceptions and feelings of students), sometimes referred to en masse as the "soft skills." Often it is implied that such skills do not have a place in the school setting, that it is not the teacher's job to aid students in the development of such

skills, and that they play little part in the overall academic success of the student. I believe this is inaccurate. Research shows that addressing and fostering the development of such skills might be just what we are lacking in education and that placing a focus here at this time—the transition between eighth and ninth grade—may significantly help "counteract the anonymity" (Creamer, 2006, para. 21) of the large high school, helping students feel more connected, known, and cared for, and thus setting the foundation for academic success.

Setting and Demographics

In this school there are approximately 150 staff members including teachers, administrators, technology and clerical staff. The school is home to approximately 1650 students. The student body consists of mostly white, middle-class students, but does enjoy the most diverse population of the district's five high schools with 57% white and over 43% non-white students. The school does have an over 40% free and reduced lunch population.

Methods and Tools

As is characteristic of action research I will gather information about how our school operates and how well our students learn and are prepared for the their high school experience and beyond. Mills (2010) explains the process and purpose of action research as the collection of information that is, "gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment (and on educational practices in general), and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved" (Mills, 2010, p. 5). As such, information gathered for this project will include currently existing research related to this work conducted by others in the field. I

will use the recommendations of researchers who have studied successful advisory programs and school administrators and teachers who have been involved in such programs. I will also conduct various interviews with educators in our community to discern from them what ninth graders seem to be lacking and where special focus should be placed to help our ninth graders find the greatest success throughout their high school experience. I will also analyze our school's first attempt at implementing an advisory program—the creation of which I was instrumental in designing and implementing, but which ultimately failed.

Interviews. I will conduct interviews with staff and teachers related to their individual experience with students, focusing mostly on those who have worked, and who are currently working with ninth grade students. These individuals can likely provide the greatest insight into what ninth grade students need and the deficits from which they suffer as a group. I will also conduct interviews with staff who has worked, and who are currently working with tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders to help determine the struggles of upperclassmen to determine what skills and issues might be addressed in ninth grade that might be beneficial on which to focus. Lastly, I will interview teachers who work in other schools that feature advisory programs. These teachers, I hope, can provide insight into what has worked for their school, the problems they ran into and the pitfalls to avoid. These interviews will be conducted in person whenever possible and over the phone, via email, or by paper questionnaire where it proves more convenient for the interviewee.

Experiential Analysis. My experience designing, creating, and working in a teacher student advisory is minimal. From early planning stages to the ending of the program our

work lasted just under one year, but working through it we learned very valuable lessons that will help inform this project. There were a great number of things that we did right, but there were also areas where things did not go well at all. We made a lot of mistakes, as can be expected with any large0 scale project like this, and although we did not get the opportunity to shift, grow, and make the necessary changes to fine tune our program into something viable and successful, the lessons learned can help to create that now. I will go back through this past experience thoroughly and analyze the process to identify the strengths and weaknesses of our initial endeavor and apply those things that proved beneficial and work to avoid the things that proved otherwise.

Summary

This project design will be created for a large suburban district high school in the Midwest. Since the nature of the question— How can an advisory program be implemented into the structure of a large suburban high school to foster academic success in ninth grade students?—is rooted in the affective domain, much of the curriculum will have to do with the so-called "soft skills," including interpersonal communication, goal-setting, work ethic, etc. In order to develop the needed skills, on which to build the program I will gather data through the analysis of our earlier effort creating and running a teacher-student advisory and conduct interviews with school staff related to the skills and deficits of focus. I will also conduct interviews with staff of other high schools who have In chapter four I will present the teacher-student advisory program design.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

<u>Background</u>

As stated before, our large suburban high school houses about 1650 students. The school is located in a town where new housing development has largely stopped. Thus, our school has been declining in enrollment over the last 5 to 7 years and our student demographics have changed dramatically with in the last decade. Where once our school student population sat at about 90% white students, today we enjoy a diversity unmatched in our district where nearly 50% of our student population are students of color. Our high school prides itself on producing well-rounded students and touts a *Triple A* philosophy including excellence in academics, arts and athletics. However, we have struggled in recent years to stay competitive in regard to the major measurement by which schools are judged – standardized academic achievement tests. Educational gaps between white students and students of color are very real as we know at our school. As a result of this shift in student demographics, and perhaps our test score numbers, we have also witnessed the phenomenon of white flight where many of our more affluent students (which of course tend to be the students to perform better on standardized achievement tests) have been leaving our school to enroll in the other area high schools.

Over the last few years we have been making a philosophical and pedagogical shift toward becoming a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) high school. This shift has brought impressive new programming and initiatives into our institution and in many ways reinvigorated our staff and students. Instead of the flight we

were seeing there has been renewed interest in our school from students pining to enroll to parents and community members singing our praises.

We still struggle as all schools do to improve our test scores and overall achievement, and are continually looking for ways to help our students and staff improve the teaching and learning process. I firmly believe that one way to significantly improve academic achievement and the student experience in general would be to put in place a teacher-student advisory program in our institution. In the remainder of this chapter I will lay out an advisory design well suited for our school. I will first recount our earlier attempt at creating an advisory program in our school and draw from that experience what we learned about how to construct and run a successful program. I will also summarize my research data collected through a series of interviews with educators in our building and a couple teachers in other area schools who have worked in advisory programs and use that data to inform the design of this advisory program. Finally I will lay out my advisory design based around five major goals.

Early Development of Program

Change agents. A few years ago I began a group made up of about ten teachers in our school who wanted to create positive change in our building. I had conversations with many of these individuals about the problems we faced in our institution. During these conversations each of them stressed a desire to make changes that could positively affect our students and staff. These conversations were the catalyst that brought this group together. Those teachers then invited other colleagues with whom they had had similar conversations. We met every two weeks and discussed the problems as we saw them. At first, the meetings were a place for people to vent and air their grievances, and people

found it cathartic to discuss their frustrations; it was also affirming to find that others, in

many cases, shared their views and concerns. We listed the issues as they were shared

and eventually decided to prioritize these issues by importance. Then we identified the

ones over which we thought we had some semblance of control and therefore had the

greatest potential to affect. One of the ideas that came from this group was the possibility

of a teacher-student advisory program. This type of program had been done successfully

in other schools in our area and in the nation. The group decided that this was a thing we

should pursue.

We spent a number of meetings discussing what a teacher-student advisory might

look like in our school. After we had put together a decent proposal I took it to our

administration, excited and empowered. We had something with great potential that

could positively affect our school culture and teachers, from the ground up, not a mandate

from above. We were told that it was a good idea, that others had mentioned the

possibility in the past, but there had not been a significant proposal like the one we

created. Ultimately, however, it was not something our school would pursue. We were

disheartened.

The group continued to meet. We did a book study, came up with other, smaller,

initiatives, but after two and a half years the group disbanded. A number of the teachers

moved on to other buildings, took different positions, or focused their efforts elsewhere.

The conversations continued. Advisory was often discussed but we all knew it was a pipe

dream, so that was all it was—conversation about what might have been.

Advisory gets new life. A couple years later our school established an "equity

team" or "e-team" to address the educational inequities that exist for minority students in

our school. The problem of inequity was not specific to our school, of course, but seems rather universal in the American educational system. Our district decided to establish e-teams at four of our five high schools to work toward a more equitable experience for all. Conversations began about how to improve the equity gap for our more underachieving student populations.

I joined the e-team in the second year, as equity and social justice had become a very important issue to me in my professional life. The equity team was engaging in conversations about how best to support our underserved and underrepresented students. We identified all the different groups on whom we needed to focus our efforts but as the list grew it seemed more and more that what was needed was a catch-all program— something that could work, at least as a starting point, to support all of our students. I realized that an advisory seemed like an ideal program to fit our needs and the needs of our student body. I pitched the idea and before long the establishment of an advisory became a significant focus of our group. With other things on which to focus, it was decided that an equity team subcommittee would be formed to take on the task of putting together a proposal and design of what an advisory might look like at our school. The advisory planning team was made up of five teachers who volunteered to head the group. They volunteered because they believed in the potential benefits of an advisory program. They volunteered with no promise, or even talk, of compensation.

I did some research on the potential benefits of student advisory and we put together a tentative model agreed on by the E-team and administration. The model we finally settled on was less than ideal in the advisory planning team's view. We had to make a number of concessions in order for the project to get off the ground, but we

believed that if we did get it off the ground we would be in a position in the future to mold the program into a closer representation of what we thought it should be.

The Ideal. Our ideal program would meet on a regular and frequent basis. We thought once a week would be ideal. This would allow the group to get to know one another and allow the advisor to get to know each of the students, to build trusting relationships and cohesiveness as a group. Regular, frequent meetings would also allow timely and meaningful checks on academic progress, would allow the advisor to develop an understanding of student personalities, behavior and patterns making it possible for the advisor to note when something was amiss with a student and so could take the necessary action.

As a planning team we decided, based on the numbers of our students and staff who could participate, that a ratio of 1/12 up to a 1/15 teacher to student ratio was ideal. We believed that such a program would benefit greatly if counselors and administration could be involved too. We wanted a couple administrators and a counselor each to have their own advisory group along with each faulty member. There were a number of reasons for this. First, the more people we could include as advisors the better the teacher-student ratio would be. Second, as with any initiative, buy-in was very important to our success. We felt that if an administrator or two ran an advisory and could help us to build it from the ground up, refine it, and could see firsthand the potential benefits for students we have a much better potential than without these key figures involved. Third, having administration involved in this way could be very persuasive in terms of viability in the eyes of our staff, students, parents and community. We could see no disadvantage

to having administration or counseling involved in this integral way. As it was, we had two administrators and a counselor volunteer each take an advisory group.

Logistics. Because we decided to create an advisory specifically for ninth graders, we had to create an alternate schedule in order to make time for the groups to meet. A number of ninth grade classes are ninth-grade-pure including English 9, civics and Earth science; however there are many classes that include mixed grade levels. Wellness, for instance, is a class that is taken mostly by ninth graders, but in nearly every section there are one or more tenth, eleventh, or twelfth grade students as well. Some students choose not to take wellness during ninth grade for various reasons, and some retake the course as upperclassmen if they fail the course in ninth grade. There are many other courses with similar dynamics including band, algebra II, geometry, etc. For this reason we were forced to create an alternative schedule for the entire school on days when our ninth grade advisories would meet. This disrupted the school day for the entire population. This fact played a huge role in our administration's decision to limit meeting times for ninth grade advisories—something we could understand as a planning team, but that later became a major detriment to the program. This will be discussed further in a later section of this chapter.

The ninth-grade advisory planning team also made recommendations regarding the length of meetings on advisory days. We wanted the time to be significant enough for groups to do meaningful work, have important conversations, and build rapport. The school already has a number of alternate schedules for various events. One of those schedules allows for an extended second period leaving open a full fifty minutes—the length a one class period at our school. A fifty-minute period would certainly allow

groups to do a great number of things within a single meeting. Some members of the group, however, thought that fifty minutes might be too long and could be intimidating to some of the advisors. Administration was not interested in allowing us fifty minutes per meeting and steered us toward another of our alternative schedules—also an extended second period—but gave advisory groups only twenty minutes to meet. This was far from ideal. Twenty minutes would greatly limit what we could do within the constraints of a meeting. This is what we ended up with and became another of our concessions.

Another thing that we had to attend to was what the rest of the school would do when ninth grade advisory groups met. Since we had to create a schedule for the entire school all students and staff would find themselves faced with twenty extra minutes of class time. We knew we had to create something simple that would not force teachers to have to plan or prep too much. This could not be a great burden on our staff because the success of the advisory program depended greatly on this aspect of the program as well. If this extra time put too much pressure on staff or students, the advisory program would likely fail.

We developed three main ideas for filling this time for our tenth, eleventh and twelfth grade classes. The first idea was to allow students twenty minutes of free time. The unstructured time model was something that other schools around the country had been experimenting with. There was research to back up the potential benefits of allowing students to have time during the school day that was not regimented like the rest of their day, and that allowed them some autonomy, an opportunity to relax, socialize, and take a break from the stresses of the day. The team liked the idea, but decided that this would not be our best option at this particular time. One problem was that many staff

members and administrators would likely be understandably nervous about giving approximately twelve hundred students free rein of the building. There were too many unknowns with this option. If this time was going to be a factor in the overall success or failure of the advisory program, then we wanted a little more control over the situation.

The second option that was touted was borrowed from something that our district high schools had already been doing. The year before, the district asked the schools to create an opportunity for remediation allowing students time during the school day to get extra help from teachers, make up assignments or tests or, for students who were up to date on their work, time to engage in some enrichment opportunities. Some of the enrichment opportunities included free time in the gym or weight room, meditation, community service, chess, etc. This option was something that the staff and students were already used to and the majority of our population looked on it favorably. It would allow students some freedom during the day, but that time was relatively more structured and therefore more predicable. It was already something that had been done successfully, so there were few unknown variables with which to contend.

One problem with this option was that it did require teachers to do a bit of prep work beforehand. Teachers who chose to do remediation with students had to make sure grades were updated, seek out and sign students up to meet with them to complete work or engage in a tutoring session. Staff who decided to offer an enrichment activity also had to plan, structure, and supervise their event. This was more work than we had intended teachers to do and we felt it put an undue burden on our staff, which many would not appreciate. Another problem with this model was that the remediation times were set as two different, rotating, alternative schedules by the district. Schedule one had

remediation/enrichment time set to occur at 9:00am, which worked perfectly for us, but the time allotment was 50 minutes and we had already been limited to 20 minutes for our advisory meetings. The second schedule had remediation/enrichment time scheduled from 1:05pm to 2:20pm (approximately 75 minutes). The greater problem was that the district had aligned the dates and times that these opportunities would occur during each trimester at all schools so that there would be fewer scheduling conflicts for teachers or students who travelled between schools. The district would not allow us to alter or add remediation time to our schedule. There were only two scheduled remediation days during a trimester—one about every four weeks—and we had planned for our advisory groups to meet every other week when possible. The two could not coexist.

Our final option, and the one we ultimately chose, was a much more academic and structured event. Our school sets a building goal every year to improve something fundamental. This usually is tied to standardized testing and has historically pertained to math or reading improvement. Every staff member is asked to set at least one individual goal that ties to the building goal. In this particular school year, our building goal was to improve overall literacy as a site and hopefully improve our student reading test scores. We worked with our building reading specialist and created something we called "The Literacy Moment." Essentially, during the time period when our ninth grade advisory groups met, the rest of the building, all tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders and any faculty not involved in an advisory would engage in 20 minutes of quiet reading time. This would be set time on a regular basis that students would be encouraged to read something for pleasure. Our reading specialist explained that reading for pleasure was a great way to help students appreciate the joy of reading, and that any time spent reading

was of benefit to us all regarding our level of reading ability. This seemed like the perfect solution. It filled the extra time created by our altered schedule, it allowed students a measure of freedom in choosing to read something that they would enjoy, it allowed students and staff a much needed break in the day and it could potentially help our school meeting the yearly building goal. It did require teachers to do some simple planning and preparation ahead of time in the form of making reading materials available to students, allowing students to find something to read in preparation for the day, and reminding students, who can sometimes be forgetful, to bring their reading materials on the scheduled day. Overall these requirements of teachers seemed minor enough that they would not present a great burden.

      Gaining staff support. An important next step was to gain support from the staff. Without that we would not have been able to proceed. We needed the staff on our side whether they were to be assigned to an advisory or whether their students would be involved in the literacy moment. A majority of the faculty had to be in favor of this initiative because we needed both sides to work in order for the program to succeed. We pulled our rationale together, some of our research, some initial goals and our structural plan for the advisory groupings and meetings. What we had put together was of great quality and extremely persuasive. In our view there was little disadvantage to creating such a program at our school. There were some concerns among staff as we expected. Some were concerned that this would create extra work for already overworked teachers. Some were concerned about discipline issues in these groups. How would we decide how groups would be devised? Who would serve as advisors? Did everyone have to be an advisor? Luckily, we had most of these questions covered.

Advisors, at least at this stage of the pilot, would be voluntary. No one had to be a part of this who did not wish to be. We believed that it was important to start with volunteers. We did not want to force anyone to do this who did not want to. We needed this pilot to go well and needed people involved who would do a great job mentoring students. We asked for volunteers, but we also went directly to key individuals whom we wanted to be advisors. We went to them with the information we had prepared, talked with them candidly about the program, explained why we thought their involvement was key and encouraged them to volunteer. Many agreed on the spot. We selected a number of key people we hoped would take on an advisory. These were people we knew would devote themselves to the initiative and some whom we knew held some influence over the rest of the staff, people who others respected and looked to for guidance. Our reading specialist, for instance, is a very respected member our faculty, a highly intelligent individual and a great educator who truly cares about students. If he took on an advisory he would be able to help us develop our program and if things went well the staff would listen to his recommendations. We also targeted a number of department chairs—also individuals who we knew would give a genuine effort and who had influence over the direction our school takes. One of our most respected administrators also volunteered on our recommendation. And we asked our principal to also take on advisory and he agreed. We actually ended up with more volunteers than the program could support and we had to turn some people away. This was a very good problem to have. Those we turned down were put on a list to become advisors if another teacher advisor left the building or could not fulfill the duties of an advisor for whatever reason. These extra volunteers would also

be first on our list to take on an advisory if we expanded the program to the upper grades in the future.

Another concern from staff was how we would create groups and how we would divide students up in an appropriate and fair manner. Advisors wanted to be sure that no one individual ended up with a high concentration of especially needy, difficult-to-deal-with kids. Allowing this to happen could easily be a detriment to the program. It was obvious we could not do this alphabetically or at random. We received statistics, data, and notes from our two feeder schools and worked with our administrative team to build groups that were balanced in a number of ways. We made sure that there was a fair balance of males and females, different races and cultures, grade point average and test scores. We took into account behavior referrals and other notes from the middle schools. We made a point to make sure that each advisory group had only a small number of students with discipline issues, behavioral challenges, or poor academic record. The fewer difficult cases that teachers had on which to focus the better this would go for all involved.

Building the program design. At this point we seemed to have everything we needed to move forward. We had all the volunteer advisors we needed, balanced groupings of students, a schedule that was less than ideal, but workable. The only thing we needed now was content for the advisory to work with. On one level, we did not want to create a curriculum at all. We did not want advisory meetings to feel like another class to students. We wanted them to be fun, practical, enjoyable and useful to students. At the same time we did not to burden our teacher advisors with having to create their own content for every meeting. We decided to create a series of suggested activities and easy-

to-follow lesson guides for advisors to use if they wished, but also offer advisors the ability to do what they felt their students would benefit from the most. Some advisors wanted the freedom and some desired structure, this allowed each to work within the domain they most preferred.

Everything was finally in place and we began our first attempt as a school with an advisory program. The first few meetings went well. After each meeting we sent an email to all advisors and collected reflective comments from some of them. This too was a voluntary activity. In most cases we received positive feedback from teachers regarding their experience. Teachers also gave us suggestions as to small improvements that could be made from their end. And in some cases our advisors told us about how the activity for the day was not going well and the adjustments they made on the fly. Some of these adjustments we decided to incorporate into our program in the future. These were good teachers doing what good teachers do, and this is why we sought out these individuals in the first place. Everything was going well, but eventually there was a breakdown at multiple points in the system.

What went wrong. There were a number of issues that, when taken individually, were not terribly significant or threatening to the program, but in sum proved detrimental. To many our advisory work was a great success. There were still kinks that needed to be worked out, but good things were happening. The foundations of relationships were being formed among advisors and advisees. With the help of some of our most creative advisors and even suggestions from students, the program was being fine-tuned as we went along. Ultimately, however, the problems proved too great, and the unfortunate decision was made to discontinue the program before it really had a chance to get going.

Time constraints. The first issue was born in the planning stages of the program. Earlier I discussed the scheduling issues that emerged early on. Since we were singling out ninth grade students, and due to the existence of many mixed, grade-level classes, we were unable to create an alternative schedule that only affected ninth grade students. Many of the advisors also were teachers of upper-grade-level students; therefore a ninth-grade-only schedule would conflict with their teaching schedules as well. We also could not use an already existing alternative schedule devised by the district for the purposes of remediation and enrichment due to restrictions the district had placed on said schedule. Administration recommended we use an already existing schedule that extended second period by twenty minutes. By default our advisory meetings were scheduled to be twenty minutes long.

From the beginning this proved to be an issue for advisors. We asked advisors for feedback at the conclusion of each meeting. The most common comment we received was that the twenty minutes also had to include passing time from classroom to classroom and taking attendance. This meant most meetings were actually only about fifteen minutes long. Due to the time constraints we had to plan activities that could be completed in fifteen minutes or less. We did this, but much of the content felt superficial as a result. Even with activities designed to fit time constraints, advisors still struggled to complete the recommended activities and it certainly was not an ideal amount of time for make lasting connections with students.

Breakdown of concurrent literacy time. One of the things that had to happen for this program to be successful was the activity planned for the rest of the school that ran parallel to our advisory meetings. If there was a breakdown in this plan, the advisory was

doomed to failure as well. For the concurrent literacy time to work we needed teachers to do very little. It was recommended that they remind students to get and bring their reading materials on the days that they would be meeting. One idea was to have students bring their reading materials into class and leave them in the classroom so that they were there when needed. Our reading specialist offered to help teachers create small reading libraries of high interest materials in their classrooms for students who forgot their own. Though it was up to the teacher to allow or disallow what students could or could not read, and whether students could use electronic devices (e-readers, smartphones, tablets, etc.), our reading specialist recommended that we to allow students to read whatever type of material that interested them whether it be a book, magazine, graphic novel, comic book, etc. on whatever platform made sense to them. All we asked was that teachers hold students accountable for doing the reading. We also asked that teachers take the time to read themselves, to model reading for enjoyment to their students.

The problem was that a number of teachers did not hold their students accountable and allowed them instead to do homework, or even sleep. When students started to talk it became apparent that many students in Teacher A's class were not reading. Then students in Teacher B, C, and D's classes began refusing to read. This certainly happens in schools. To rectify it Teacher A would normally be asked to tighten up the practice or all teachers would be reminded to do so for the sake of those who were not. This did not happen. No one was watching closely enough to help make the necessary adjustments.

Part of the problem here was that some key players who would normally do this were running their own advisories—our principal, one of our assistant principals, our

reading specialist to name a few. With a few of our administrators handling their own advisory, they were taken out of the equation and were not privy to the what was going on outside of their advisory in a way that they could easily help the situation. Our other administrators had to take up the slack leaving them little time to focus on the reading activity. We did not have one person monitoring this time as we should have. This would have normally been our principal and likely our reading specialist, both of whom had their own advisory groups. Both individuals were important and strategic choices as advisors, but in hindsight, perhaps it would have been better for the program to have had them in a position where they could have helped iron out the kinks in the reading program as it was such an important piece of the overall equation.

Negative interpretation among students. Another problem that we ran into was how some of our students viewed the advisory program. Advisors often reported that some freshman students in their advisory groups asked why they were being "babied" or treated differently than other students in the school and communicated embarrassment around upperclassmen because of it. We expected there to be some resistance from our ninth-grade students. This was a new program and there was likely to be talk of this nature. We created a unified message for advisors to share to combat this line of thinking. We wanted to make it clear to students that, yes, we were treating them differently than ninth grade students in the past, but not because we though them incapable or lesser in any way, but because we wanted to help them be as successful as they could be as they go through high school. We wished that all students, past and future had had the opportunity that they had in this advisory program and we hoped that this was only the start of this program. That it would be in place next year for the incoming freshman and if

we had our way advisory would extend to the upperclassmen too. They were special and lucky, not less capable than their predecessors.

What I found most interesting was the reaction of many upperclassmen regarding the advisory program. They also had a negative view of it. Some felt that we were babying the ninth graders, but there seemed with many to be an undercurrent of jealousy. In multiple instances there were reports of upperclassmen complaining that we were treating the ninth graders like children. They complained that they were not treated like this and neither should the current freshmen be because, as everybody knew, when you get to high school it is sink or swim just like it was for them. Other reports had older students going even further claiming that we must love the present ninth graders more than we did those in the past because we were giving them so much more special attention. Why didn't we do that for them when they were freshmen. Although some of the negative feelings communicated by our upper grades seemed to have underlying feelings of jealousy at their root, and even though we tried to coalesce on a message to combat such negative feelings, still when an idea surfaces in a population it can work like a virus, spreading and gaining strength no matter what you put in its way.

Negative interpretations among faculty. As with the students there were also some negative feelings from staff. There seemed to be very little negativity coming from faculty who were not involved directly in the program. Some teachers expressed to me concerns that nothing productive was happening in our advisory meetings. There was one report of an advisory watching funny squirrel videos on YouTube for the duration of their meeting. When I went to corroborate, the teacher explained that, yes they had watched some squirrel videos on a recommendation from a student, but only for the five minutes

passing and then for a couple minutes at the end for those who had missed the videos by coming a bit late. It happened during an early meeting when we were all working on community building and getting to know one another. Little academic was happening at this time as groups were trying to create some cohesion. In this particular group the advisor had been talking to a young lady who had come very early to the advisory meeting. She had expressed her interest in squirrels and other rodents and wanted to show him a funny video on YouTube. As other students entered they witnessed the teacher and the student laughing and wanted to know what was so funny. The teacher projected the video on the board and replayed it so others could be let in on the joke. After the video ended there were a few suggested videos also of squirrels. They watched a couple more of these videos. The group had a great time. They were enjoying the company of one another. The young lady who started it all was not typically a student who received positive attention from other students. That day she was the star. The teacher said it was actually the best meeting they had had to date and that now their group mascot was to be a squirrel though they had not decided on a name yet, but they had that planned as number one on the agenda for their next meeting. I share this story to illustrate that you cannot always trust what some students (or some people in general) share as there is always a chance that they might misrepresent the details in question.

Unfortunate choices by some advisors. The greater battle that we fought with staff and negative perceptions had to do with a few of the advisors themselves. Each of the advisors had volunteered to be part of the program and to take on an advisory group. They knew from the start that it would be a full year commitment and they would strictly be working with ninth grade students. Many of the advisors were not freshmen teachers.

We could have had nearly all freshmen teachers had we wanted to do so. There were enough teachers who taught at least some ninth grade to fill the advisory roles. We chose not to do this for a number of reasons. First, we wanted advisors who volunteered and not all of the ninth grade teachers had volunteered in the first place. Second, we felt that it was important to include upper grade level teachers. We did not want this ninth grade advisory to live strictly in the realm of ninth grade. We wanted teachers across all disciplines and all grade levels to be involved so that this was, in essence, a whole school initiative. We wanted our ninth grade students to connect with upper grade level teachers right away and we wanted this advisory community to feel like it touched all corners of our institution.

Unfortunately, a couple of our upper grade level teacher advisors decided half way though the first trimester that they were uncomfortable working with ninth grade students and no longer wanted to do so. This was certainly regrettable, but it was something we could deal with. We did have a surplus of volunteers who would have happily stepped into the role of advisor. The problem was that these teachers did not share their displeasure with our administration or us. Instead they shared their feelings with their colleagues in private, and eventually word found its way to us. Another member of our planning team spoke to these individuals because they were in his department and he had a good relationship with them. He offered to have them replaced by one of our extra volunteers. They declined and assured him that they would continue to be advisors until the end of year. However, despite their assurances, these two teachers decided that instead of having another teacher come in and take over their advisory, they

would call in ill on the days we had advisory. We did not find this out until a month or two later.

These individuals spoke very negatively about the program and this certainly had an effect on others in the building. There were other teacher advisors in the program who also developed negative opinions of the program as we went along. For many of the teachers an inability to make significant connection to students was the biggest complaint. This is understandable and largely, I contend, due to the time constraints that were placed on the program. Had we more time, there were many things we could have done differently and make more lasting connections with students more quickly. There were those who felt that the activities were redundant because some of the students had done similar activities in their general classes. This was true. Many of the things we were doing were things that were done in other classes. We borrowed the best things that were being done in our school like goal setting, listening and communication skill development, note-taking, studying for tests, etc. We knew some students were already doing these things; the problem was that not all students were doing them and they should have been. Universalizing the ninth grade experience for everyone was one of the goals of our program.

Breakdown in foresight. We struggled with the advisory program from the beginning. Many of the issues, however, had to do with flaws in the structural design—the fact that our advisory only included ninth grade students caused scheduling conflicts that might not have been a problem if advisory had been built to include all grade levels the scheduling conflicts would have been minor. This was a new program and with it there would be growing pain. Rarely does anything run perfectly the first time through,

but our administration and advisors seemed unable to see it from this perspective. Our administration pushed to end the program after just the first trimester. As a planning team we struggled with this feeling that we had not had sufficient time to get the program going properly or to iron out the inevitable kinks. We were able to persuade the administration to allow us to continue through the second trimester, though we had originally agreed to give it a full school year. In order to do this we had make more concessions. We agreed to fewer meetings—three meetings instead of six, essentially once a month. We knew this would be extremely detrimental to our efforts but it was the only option we had if we wanted to continue. Ultimately, after some contentious discussions, the program was cancelled at the end of the second trimester.

Moving forward I have tried to stay true to our original vision while also maintaining the charge set by the school. I attempt to create a balance between our unbiased ideal and the practical needs of our school and the people within it.

What Can Be Applied to New Model?

We learned a great deal about creating and running an advisory program from our experience. In this design of a new advisory program I will draw from all that we learned from our successes, our struggles, and from our failures. I also collected data from a number of different individuals to help with various parts of the design. Interviewees (or respondents) include some of our current staff, who work with students at all levels, and faculty from other schools where an advisory program is in effect. This is what we learned.

Small teacher/student ratio. The small teacher-to-student ratio is very important for the advisory to be successful. Our ratio, defined by our administration at 18/1, was too

high. It was doable, but if we really wanted students and teachers to build relationships early on, the groups should be smaller allowing a greater likelihood that each advisory teacher may get to know each of his or her students and helping students to feel known. As we recommended to our administration early on in the process of building our advisory pilot program a healthy ratio (12/1 but no bigger than 15/1) would be more effective than the larger ratio we were working with.

Involve key players. I believe it is also very important to have counselors and administration involved as advisors. There are key people we want to keep available as we found out. Perhaps the principal should remain untethered to an advisory group allowing him or her the ability to move about the building during advisory meeting time. This would allow him to observe what is happening in advisory group meetings and the rest of the school to make sure everyone is on track. If this job is not assigned to the principal, then it should be a job for someone else because, as we found, accountability is key. If people are not doing what they are supposed to be doing, the system will breakdown.

Volunteer advisors. Since a systematic breakdown is such a possible threat, as we learned, it is very important that the advisors who are in place are there because they truly want to be there. If people object to the role or the program itself, or just the work, it cannot be expected that they will do high quality work. People cannot be forced to take a special interest in others or to do extra work if we expect them to do it well. Luckily, many teachers, as I have found, are typically rather giving and selfless people. They do what they do because they do care about kids and want to help them succeed. This bodes well for a program like this.

Tenth-twelfth grade common activities. With the program set as a ninth-grade-only advisory, the problem of the concurrent activity for the rest of the school population will remain. And the success of this sister program is nearly as important as the advisory itself. As stated before, the burden that this program puts on the teacher cannot be great or the program will be doomed from the beginning. Not only could there be union issues with asking teachers to do more work, but also if the staff resents the extra work, time and headache that the system presents they will resist and resistance will undoubtedly lead to breakdown. If, however, the activity could be fun, engaging and perhaps even community-building for the classes involved there might be greater likelihood of success. While reading is a very worthwhile activity on so many levels it likely is not the most universally enjoyable activity we could come up with. One alternative might something more interactive.

As we transition to a STEM high school we have discussed the possibility of whole-school, interactive activities that our STEM design team has been referring to as "STEM challenges." STEM challenges are interactive events that pose a problem or an activity, and ask individual groups to solve or complete a series of tasks. One idea is an all-school trivia competition including different categories like school history or lore, academic questions, school sports knowledge, pop culture, current events, etc. This could be very fun and engaging and if done correctly could pose very little burden on individual teachers. However, if done poorly, it could put a great burden on teachers and therefore be doomed to failure.

Another problem with this approach is the possible time-intensive nature of the planning. Carrying out the activity could be great and if this were something that were

done on a regular basis it could quickly become too burdensome for the planning team to continue to construct every other week or so. A hybrid of the two might be the safest way to go where groups reading for one week and then engaging in an interactive activity the next. This would provide more time to create and plan and would certainly be more doable.

The Ideal Advisory for Ninth Grade Students.

In order to create a successful advisory program it is necessary to consider what we learned from our past failure and merge that with what we know or believe to be good and necessary. In order to decide what is important to include, I conducted a series of interviews targeting three different groups including 1) four current staff at our school who work with ninth grade students, 2) four current staff who work with tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students and 3) teachers who work in other schools that have advisory programs. I wanted to collect data that could inform the design of a successful advisory program for our school taking into account what our specific population of students tend to struggle with coming in as freshmen and planning for their future in the upper grade levels. I also gathered advice from teachers who work in advisory situations at their own schools, looking to avoid common pitfalls and planing to include some new ideas that are beneficial, which I might not have considered.

In the following section I will summarize the data I collected from the interviewees. In many cases there was great overlap in answers given by ninth grade teachers and teachers of upper grades related to students struggles and need. Where overlap exists I will speak in general terms, but will clearly state where they differ. The

following is a breakdown of the data collected from current ninth grade teachers working in our school.

Interview Data: Current Teachers of Ninth Grade Students

Most common difficulties with which ninth graders struggle. According to teachers interviewed, the overarching opinion among them is that students coming into ninth grade tend to harbor a false sense of importance when it comes to grades. This seems to confirm the research on middle schools' tendency toward social promotion of students, in the attempt to "protect the child from undue social and emotional stress that may occur if a student was retained" (Lynch, 2013, p. 294). The problem here, of course, is that many students coming from middle school do not have an adequate sense of their own ability. Grades are not weighted heavily and students are not encouraged to do good work nor are they deterred from holding back effort. Therefore, many fail to make the cognitive shift when entering ninth grade assuming high school will be more of the same. Many students learn this the hard way, failing courses in the first and second trimesters.

Both ninth grade teachers and teachers of upper grade levels agreed that most students come to understand the weight and importance of grades around mid freshman year. Unfortunately, most also have such poor habits that they are unable to right them before more damage is done to their GPA. In some cases, students may have come to understand the significance grades play in their future success, but do not seem to care or, as one teacher I interviewed explained, many students appear to be apathetic toward learning, but in many cases this is a front to cover up a lack of confidence. Many students, it seems to her, experience failure so much in middle school (with little incentive to improve) that it becomes something of a norm for them, something that is

fixed and unalterable. If this is part of the problem then it would seem that a new focus on grades would do little to sway the mind and habits of the student to whom failure seems a fixed reality. It is not about want or lack of want to get good grades or to be successful; it is about the student's inability to see success as a possibility.

Maturity/cognitive development. According to a number of respondents, many ninth graders also begin high school with a great lack of maturity. This may be simply due to cognitive development. Ninth grade students make great gains over the course of the year, but early on they struggle in this area. A couple of teachers stressed concern over this saying that this lack of maturity in some is very noticeable and is a reason, in some cases, why they might be targeted by upperclassmen for ridicule or worse. This can also be a reason students have a hard time understanding the shift in the importance of grades from middle school to high school—cognitively they are just not prepared for it. If they struggle to understand that a change is occurring then, it would follow that taking action to adjust for the change would be difficult, if not impossible, as well.

Work ethic. Many students, at all levels, struggle with work ethic—the belief that hard work is important and necessary. As teachers, we know that it takes hard work to get things done, to learn, to be productive, but many young people have difficulty buying into the idea. I do not know a teacher who does not try to instill this pillar of learning and life into their students. For ninth graders, a lack of maturity many seem to possess can make this lesson especially difficult to adopt, let alone master. Work ethic is yet another area that ninth grade teachers interviewees, across the board, insist is something that freshman lack and need guidance to accept, gain, and master.

Organizational skills**.** Many of the freshman teachers at our school work hard to help students gain a strong work ethic. One teacher I interviewed believes that, above all else, a strong work ethic cannot be achieved without solid organizational skills. She spends the first three weeks of school on listening, study, and organizational skills to help students get off on the right foot in ninth grade. She has done this for over twenty years. Students hate it while in the unit, she claims, but many thank her for it when they visit her later as upperclassmen or college students because it is only then that they understand the significance of staying organized.

The majority of teacher respondents pointed to organizational skills as a major lack among freshmen students. For many of them, according to one teacher, it is simply a matter of getting into the habit of writing things down as they come up and then reviewing the list of things that need to be done, prioritizing the list, and working through things methodically. It is so simple, he thinks, but it is the act of doing and doing until it becomes a strong habit. Most ninth grade students, in his experience, are not interested in doing the work it takes to create and maintain a positive habit like keeping a homework planner, but is something that could make all the difference in terms of academic success for freshmen students.

Time management. Time management is a skill closely tied to organizational skills and is another that nearly all current ninth grade teachers noted as an important skill for students to have in high school, but that the greater majority of freshmen students do not possess. With the increased amount and rigor of academic work students meet in high school, time management is supremely important. In order to stay current on work, and to

balance life, school and other activities, students must be able to manage and prioritize their time.

Interpersonal communication skills. There are, of course, many factors that play a role in the success, or lack thereof, of students in the ninth grade. Another key characteristic that was mentioned by the majority of ninth grade teachers is interpersonal communication. The ability to communicate effectively is an invaluable skill for traversing the often-complicated terrain of high school and is a skill in which every person needs a marginal proficiency in life. A number of interviewees recounted instances of miscommunication among students. Some of these anecdotes were humorous, some were startling, and most were just cringe-worthy.

Students struggle to communicate with their peers. Students at this age seem to have difficulty communicating effectively with one another. In some scenarios students simply failed to share their thoughts regarding a group assignment or in a collaborative setting. Two interviewees shared similar observations. They talked about how their freshmen students get into collaborative groups at the beginning of the year to complete group work, yet no one says a word. Like parallel play in young children, they work in the vicinity of one another, but many are unable to communicate effectively enough to truly work together. They know how to do it, they do very successful group projects in middle school, but when they get here, they seem to have to start all over again. It might be the intimidation of the high school experience or with a new group of people, many of whom are unknown, or something else completely. There are also groups of students who nail the collaborative work experience right from the get-go. These groups typically have one or two students who have strong leadership and organizational skills. Whatever it is

that these groups or individual students have it is something that interviewees communicated that they would love a place where students could work to develop these skills. How can we bottle and distribute these characteristics to the masses? This is a something it seems is rather important to address in an advisory setting.

Students struggle to communicate with adults. Another area where students struggle is in their dealings with adults in the building. Many students, I was told, just do not know how to approach a teacher, or they have no problem approaching adults but do so in tactless and inappropriate ways, often at inappropriate times. Students need help understanding how to approach teachers in effective and tactful ways. They need to understand appropriate times to engage a teacher and how to do so in a respectful manner that will leave the individual receptive to their message or request.

Collaboration. As mentioned earlier, collaboration is a skill with which ninth graders seem to struggle. Part of the problem, according to one teacher I interviewed, is communication. Some students at this level struggle to communicate with one another effectively. They are immature and get off task easily. The other part is simply understanding what it means to collaborate—to work together. For many students a collaborative group means that one or two students will do the work and the others get to ride their coat tails. This is something, according to respondents, that students lack and is a skill that has to be taught and modeled.

Soft skills. The aforementioned skills, or characteristics, that interviewees shared as things that freshmen students need, but often lack, upon entering ninth grade fall under the category of *soft skills*. The so-called soft skills are significantly important for success in school and elsewhere, but sometimes get overlooked in education or, at least,

discounted as of inferior importance to the more academic skills like reading, writing, identifying parts of speech, constructing an equation, etc. Most teachers interviewed believe that soft skills are important to teach in high school and that advisory would be a good place to do that.

But as I talked with teachers, it became apparent that an advisory situation would not the place to build academic skills, beyond study skills, at all. Where academic skills are the work of the classroom, soft skills would be the work of the advisory. Some respondents were adamant that the teaching of soft skills has no place in the school. These are things that should be taught at home and that students should come equipped with so to be most prepared to do academic work.

The majority of interviewees, however, were of the mind that these soft skills are very much the work of the school and the classroom, that these two skill-sets are inseparable. Of course, in reality, hard academic skills and soft skills are both the work of the classroom teacher. It is difficult to teach mathematical theorem or grammar skills with their rather rote nature without a measure of resilience. Teaching essay writing should be paired with time-management skills. The best teachers recognize and do this, but students do not always internalize such lessons. As an English teacher myself, for instance, I have encountered few students who manage their time working through the writing process well. And while I do always touch on, and even walk students through, the process there is not enough time to teach that soft skill well or at length. The work of advisory can help reinforce the building of soft skills.

Interview Data: Current Teachers of Upper-Grade-level students.

In my interviews with our current teachers of upper-grade-level students I found that there was a great deal of overlap in the things that freshmen students need coming into high school and the skills that students seem to need, and continue to struggle with, in the upper grades. Both groups of interviewees identified organizational skills, interpersonal communication, time-management, work ethic, and collaboration skills as things that students lack upon entering high school and continue to need and struggle to master in the upper grade levels. Since these skill sets are something that students need coming into senior high and continue to need throughout their experience in high school, it makes sense to help students by supporting them early in the cultivation of these integral skills for success.

In addition the above skills named by both groups, there were a few additional things that most upper-grade-level teachers identified as skills that many students lack but are important for students in grades ten, eleven, and twelve to possess. These skills include creative problem solving, resilience, knowledge of career and college opportunities, and authentic, real world experience.

Creative problem solving. Over the last few years, there has been a lot of talk in education about the need for students to develop 21st century skills as we move into a future where technology is changing at astronomical rates. We are moving into a time (perhaps we are already there) where many students, so they say, will be doing jobs that have not even been considered yet, and encounter issues impossible to foresee. How do we prepare students for a world like that? We need to help students become more adaptable in their thinking and foster an ability think and solve problems creatively as

students will confront a world rife with problems we have never seen before and will need solutions never before conceived. School has to be a place where students develop these skills or they will not be prepared to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Resilience. In talking about the idea of resilience, one teacher explained that learning can be fun, but it is also very hard work. Students need to be prepared for the hard work and although they do not enjoy it, it is something that school must help students to develop. This idea was put in many ways and different descriptors were used to communicate the idea of resilience like the ability to see things through, grit, and toil, but they all boil down to the same idea: students need to learn how to be resilient in the face of difficulty and failure.

Knowledge of career and college opportunities. Another catch phrase among educators and policy makers is *college and career readiness*. This idea came up several times, in different ways, in talking to upper-grade-level teachers as something that students need. Two teacher respondents talked about how many students get into their senior year and have hardly thought about what they want to do post-high school. Not only that, but many are not even aware of the many possibilities they have. We tell a cultural narrative that there are two paths in life after high school, work (which may include a trade school or community college) or the prestigious, glorified 4-year college track. In reality, of course, there are many, many other avenues for students to explore and some of the opportunities exist even while students are in high school in the form of internships, job shadowing, field experiences, mentorships, training, certification courses, and post secondary education to name a few. It is unfortunate that so many students seem so unaware of their opportunities. And without this knowledge, explained one teacher

interviewee, it must seem rather hopeless for a student who is not planning to go on to a 4-year college. We need to help students become more aware of the many, varied and exciting opportunities that exist beyond high school

Authentic, real world experience. As an extension of knowledge of career and college opportunities is the idea of authentic, real world experiences. This idea also came up in a number of forms and descriptors including problem-based learning, real world problem solving, and authentic learning, but I have pooled those ideas together under this heading because they all speak to the same characteristics. The term *experience* over *problem solving* or *learning* is broad enough to cover more ground allowing for more possibilities. The idea is that to truly prepare students for a world beyond high school we have to allow them to engage with the world in genuine ways so that they know what to expect and even what it might take to be a productive and successful citizen. Students need practice at "doing work" and "doing life". Many classes offer simulations like the marriage and economy units in family and consumer science or the create-your own-business exercise in business and communications classes. Simulations are useful but we need to extend beyond them into the real world and help students engage with the community, both local and global, or they may never really be prepared for it. Some of these things an advisory might be able to supply in the form of activities or other experiences and some an advisory program might be able to support. Whatever role the advisory plays, it could be very vital to student success in ninth grade and beyond. Supporting Students Through the Upper Grades.

The research supports the need for student academic support in the ninth grade, as it is such a pivotal year for high school students. The advisory program I propose would

certainly do this as its key feature. It is also important to help prepare ninth grade students for tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade, and life beyond senior high. Since this is so important I also asked our current teachers of upper-grade-levels what students moving into upper grades needed and how advisory could help with those needs.

Another question I asked our teachers of upper grade level students was this: What do we want students to leave with in order to find success in the world beyond? Answers to this question were varied. And included many of the skills and characteristics identified in previous questions including communication skills, creative problem solving, collaboration skills, etc. The following were mentioned numerous times and rose to the top as some of the most important things teachers would like to see students take from their education.

Knowledge. This one is easy and the one word that nearly every teacher interviewed used. To summarize the pooled ideas of teacher interviewees: This is what we do in education; we help students learn. We help them take ideas and information and turn them into knowledge by making connections between history and poetry, life experiences of others as compared to their own and help them begin to make sense of the world around them.

Life and learning skills. There seems to be a movement toward skills-based learning surmised one teacher interviewee, with the push toward standards-based grading and the like. He said that he resists this movement to some degree because skills are only part of the learning equation. It actually matters, he explains, what students read, not just that they read. There is great literature and there are great writers that have stood the test of time, who take on topics that ring universally true. This is not just in literature, but true

in mathematics and philosophy and history. The content does matter. Still, he concluded that we have to help students gain the skills necessary to learn and acquire knowledge on their own. That need to learn to think analytically and to sustain an argument or they will not be able to build knowledge beyond what they get out of high school. Other teachers interviewed shared the last bit of that opinion—we have to help students gain the skills necessary to live and learn successfully in life.

Ability to think. A number of teacher interviewees mentioned this idea. Many students really struggle to engage in deep, sustained thought. This problem was, in many cases, blamed on technology, especially mobile technology, that is so rampant in our culture today. Students seem to need constant stimulation and instant gratification to stay engaged. Learning is not always like this and so students struggle to stay engaged. If the topic does not interest them or takes too much effort, many students will simply turn to something simpler like a game on their phone. This is one skill teacher's fight constantly to instill in their students because without the ability to really think, it is hard to be successful in life.

Work ethic. Another very important skill that teachers believe students must take with them when they go is a strong work ethic. Students need to be able to put in the hard work and will be expected to do so in any job they have. The world requires it of us. Work ethic is something that students of all levels struggle with but is something that we have to help them to develop before they leave our institution.

Adaptability. The consensus here is that the world is a rapidly changing place and students will need to be able to continuously adapt to changing technology, cultural realities, societal constructs and the like if they are to be happy and well-adjusted adults.

With so many changes constantly occurring a person who is unable to adapt physically, emotionally, and intellectually will struggle through life most certainly. We have to help students be open to change.

Finally, I asked interviewees what else is necessary or should be incorporated into an advisory program. Below is a summary of the ideas they shared. A majority of respondents identified STEM pillars and inquiry-based learning as something that should be included in an advisory program in some way. Our school has been working toward becoming a full-fledged STEM high school and it makes sense for our advisory, as a place to support the transition to ninth grade, help students become better acquainted with the STEM philosophy and the idea of inquiry-based learning that our district is working to integrate throughout our network of schools.

Another thing that came up several times in responses to this question is a focus on growth mindset and habits of mind. Our school has adopted the ideas presented in Carol Dweck's book *Mindset* and we have been trying to instill these values in our staff and students as we build our STEM philosophy into our curricula and programing. This ties directly to STEM and inquiry as well as inquiry-based learning as the focus is on learning growth and potential instead of fixed, finite understanding of learning and intelligence. We want our students to take ownership of their own learning, but to do so they must first understand that it is a possibility—that they can take control of their own learning and that learning is an ongoing process that can be built upon. We could aid this in our work as an advisory.

Another important facet of any school is the building of community. This came up in a number of times in responses to this question. We want ninth graders to feel like they

belong at our school and that our school belongs to them, as such helping students connect to our school and to their peers. In my research, community building was one of the most important things an advisory can do for students, as the feeling of being known and connected is essential to optimize student learning.

And as I stated before, education is really about preparing students for the future. Teacher interviewees seem to agree with this sentiment. A significant portion of respondents identified career and college exploration as something that an advisory could help students with. This is certainly something that student will become more and more interested in as they move through school, but in reality they need to start thinking about it as soon as they can. At our school we have STEM pathways that students can get involved in early on that will guide them on a career path. It is important we help students recognize the possibilities our school offers students in regard to a path to a career possibility. It is also important to help students understand what is required of them in order to meet any future goals they might have, be it a particular school they wish to attend or an industry they yearn to enter. An advisory could aid students in their early career and college discovery, help them shape their goals and design a path to attain them.

Advisory Dos and Don'ts: Recommendations.

Professional development. Provide professional development to advisors even those who are not involved in running an advisory. Everyone needs to know what is happening in the advisory program and the point of the program or people will begin to loose interest. A lack of interest will lead to dwindling support. Professional development can include such things as how to talk to students about difficult topics or how to connect

with students. Professional development could also include site-specific training on things like how to navigate the student services center or career center or how to sign up for extra-curricular activities. Advisors need to know how things work if they are to help students find and navigate these things. Whatever shape your professional development takes make sure it is practical and relevant to what the advisory it doing in your school.

Expectations and accountability. Set expectations for advisors and advisees and hold them accountable. Advisors need to help students set goals and take steps toward attaining them. They need to make sure that students are held accountable for working toward them. They should be held accountable for the work they do or do not do. At the same time advisors need to be held accountable for the work that they do with students. You have to decide what this will look like and the goals and expectations for advisors, but it is important to continue to hold them accountable or they may become apathetic. When this happens the program will start to die—everyone needs to remain invested and the administration can help to make sure that happens.

Resources. Provide resources and continually remind advisors and advisees that they exist. One of the interview participants who works in a school where an advisory is in place explained that they use a Google sites page where information is archived and organized for easy retrieval by advisors and advisees. These resources include articles, websites and other online resources, discussion topic suggestions and conversation starters, examples of activities that can be done in an advisory to build community or break the ice, goal statements, etc. The interviewee said that she is not sure how many advisory participants actually use the site but she knows for some it has been a good resource especially for teachers new to the school and their advisory program.

Create a support team. Have a person or a small group of people run ongoing support for the advisory groups. On experienced participant explained, "people are going to be confused and frustrated when you begin your advisory. They will have questions and they will need to vent. Make sure that there are people in place to deal with this or your advisors will feel lost." In the school where this interview participant works there are a number of people who have been involved in the advisory for many years and who feel comfortable in the setting—these people are the program's "go-to people" for anyone who has questions, everyone knows who they are and how to find them. The interviewee explained that it is important to create a small network of support for advisors to help when needed, "even just knowing that those people are there is a comfort to many whether they seek out their help or not."

Communicate. Both interview participants who are involved in advisories at their school explained that communication is a very important part of the success of their programs. "You have to have open lines of communication. That's very important," explained one interviewee. "Everyone needs to know what the expectations are, they need to be able to ask questions, they need to know the schedule and feel informed." He explained that this is important for advisors and advisees. If this does not occur, he explained, people will become frustrated and put the program in jeopardy if that frustration becomes widespread.

Make it fun. Both experienced interviewees agreed on the point that advisory should be fun, at least at times. One program seemed to hold this characteristic in higher esteem than the other, but both programs do feature fun as a key ingredient. One of these programs play icebreaker games often and, I was told, advisors develop a great rapport

with students. They joke around a lot and banter with advisees. The other program seemed to take this part of the program more seriously. At her school, advisors play games with students and they often organize full-school games like trivia that are played during advisory time. Some advisory groups pair up for games and other activities and many of the advisory groups bring in food to share. "Food goes a long way toward this goal," the participant explained. "Sometimes all that is done during meeting time is eating and chatting, but that's okay." The interviewee explained that one of the most important things an advisor can do is to create a comfortable place for students to be, so that when a question comes up or a difficult conversation emerges, students will feel comfortable enough to ask or participate.

Set goals. One of the teacher respondents who currently works in a school with an advisory program in place explained that when they began their advisory the thing that took the most time was the creation of goals. She said deciding the most important goals to focus on were very important and that originally they had nearly two-dozen goals. They quickly realized this was far too many and whittled their goals down to eight. This gave their program clear direction and focus and did not expect too much from their program. "We realized that an advisory program was not going to be a fix-all and that we had to focus our efforts on very practical and specific things or we'd likely loose sight of our goals quickly," she explained. Each year they revisit their goals and update them as needed because the program is in constant fluctuation responding to the needs of students as they come.

Beyond program goals, she also recommended that advisors and advisees also set future goals. Advisors need to constantly be improving their practice in the classroom and

in their participation in an advisory. Setting goals as part of professional practice is nothing new for educators, but doing so publicly could be a very beneficial for students. As educators we know the importance of modeling for students to see that teachers practice what they preach and simply to show students how the process works. Students need to get in the practice of setting goals, both long and short term goals, and then continually coming back to them and holding themselves accountable for the goals they set, she said, is one of the most important things their advisory does for students. "And then we are there to help them meet those goals step by step or to understand what is getting in the way of meeting them. Either way it is an incredibly powerful learning experience."

Advisory Dos and Don'ts: Things to Avoid

Along with the recommended practices my interviewees who currently work in an advisory situation also shared a few things to avoid. Some of these things are examples of things that happened in their own advisory programs or things that they were advised to avoid when establishing their own programs in the past.

Do not script everything. Many advisory programs create and issue a sort of script to advisors in the form a curriculum or guide where meetings are all planned. The problem is that doing it this way leads to lack of authenticity. Both advisors and advisees will feel the spurious nature of what they are doing and lose interest or not view the time as worth their while. If the advisor does not seem invested the advisees will not buy in to what they are doing. If the advisees cannot be won over, the advisor is more likely to give up or not put in the time or work necessary to get results. "Everyone wants to see results," one interviewee shared, "or if not results at least the feeling that everyone is

genuinely working toward the same end. Without that shared feeling of activity you will not find success in the program. Everyone has to be invested."

Do not take advisor support and PD for granted. Advisors need continual support to be successful in the advisory situation. Many teachers are very good with students and are capable of building relationships with them in the context of the classroom, but "the advisory is a different beast." Some teachers will be very uncomfortable with the organic nature of an advisory. It is important not to plan every minute, but to let conversations happen naturally. And advisors don't have all the answers and that's ok, but your teachers need to be prepared for this or it's like shooting them in the foot before they start the race." Both respondents who currently work in advisory situations agreed that professional development needs to be ongoing. Teachers need to be prepared before they go into an advisory situation so they know what they are going into and they need regular support throughout the process as well. They will struggle especially at the beginning and they need to be reassured that they are on the right track and doing the right thing.

Do not over-burden advisors. Advisors are also teachers and teachers are often overworked and already overburdened with their day-to-day work, so asking them to do more is a difficult thing to do. It is important that advisors are not asked to do too much and that responsibilities are not piled on. They need to be working in support of a school's other programing and not running the programs themselves. This means that advisors, when working in their advisory mode, are not tutors, teachers, counselors, psychologists, administrators, etc. One interviewee explained, "advisors will take on many roles to the students in their group, but their primary role must be *advisor*, meaning they may advise students on ways to solve their problems or direct them to those who can

help them, but do not actually do the solving." The advisor does not replace the classroom teacher or any other specialist in the building; they simply work in concert with them to optimize support and services for students.

Do not make advisory time feel like another class. Advisory "shouldn't have a pre-built curriculum in the traditional sense with day-to-day activities because it's not another class in the day. No one wants that," commented one teacher respondent. Advisory should be fun, it should be built around creating a safe and secure community of people working toward common goals and it need not be structured in the traditional sense like a classroom. "What is it they say? Structure killed the cat, right? Ha-ha. That's not it, but it works here," joked another interviewee. "Sometimes all you'll do is talk. Sometimes you just play a game and sometimes nothing at all. But that's ok because it's about the bigger picture. There's no test at the end and sometimes the best advisory moments happen outside of advisory time when students seek you out privately for help because you've made that connection with them."

Do not give up if things get difficult. These two teacher interviewees both assured me during their interviews that things will get difficult at times. Advisors will complain and advisees will complain. Parents might object because it seems to them that time is being taken away from learning. Administrators and classroom teachers who are not involved in the advisory program might question the validity of what is being done when they see games being played and students lounging around seeming to have nothing to do. One interviewee, who was very instrumental in planning the advisory program at her school some years ago, said criticism "might come from anywhere and sometimes it will feel like it's coming from everywhere, but you have to be steadfast in your resolve that

advisory is worth the trouble no matter what others say or think about it." And there will

be growing pains, as with anything, when you first start out she said. "You won't get it

right on the first go. You have to let something like this grow and become what your

school needs. You have to let the people grow into it too. It may look very different at the

end than it did at the beginning, but you have to give that time to happen. You can't give

up when things prove difficult. You can't let others give up either."

<u>Advisory Design</u>

The information collected from my interviews with these ten highly skilled

individuals, paired with what I learned through my reading, research, and experience

proved significantly helpful in the design of an advisory program fitting to our school's

culture and clientele. In the following section I will lay out my advisory program design

drawing on the information posed above.

A number of years ago our school attempted to construct and run an advisory

program. We failed in our attempt. The advisory program was fair in its design, but was

doomed by a number of fatal flaws. Still, I draw largely on this experience in the design

of an ideal advisory program for our school. We did some things very well and I

incorporate those successes into the design laid out in this chapter. We also made

mistakes and those things are also used as fodder for design. Along with our success and

stumbles there were also a number unforeseen and unavoidable pitfalls that lead to the

deterioration and ultimate demise of our program. We learned from all of these things.

<u>Early work</u>. The first time we put together an advisory, we did it right. We

prepared and presented the information to our staff regarding the potential benefits of

advisory and asked for their input and consent to move forward with the implementation

of the program. I think this is the only way to go. Gaining the support of the school faculty and staff is imperative to program success. This effort needs to be teacher led with the full support of school administration. I will again put together an advisory planning and support team to put the pieces together and to provide the necessary support to students and teachers.

We will ask for teacher volunteers to serve as advisors. Especially at the beginning of the program it is important that we have advisors who are truly invested in and believe in the potential of the program. I do not wish to put anyone in the role that does not wish to be there. We will ask for volunteers and I will visit individuals who we believe would do well in this type of role and see if they would be willing to serve as a student advisor. Once we have our list of approximately 30 volunteer advisors we can put together our advisory groups.

Organization and logistics. Groups will again be constructed purposefully balancing student gender, race and ability levels. We will use student history data and narrative information from our feeder middle schools to determine placement for students. We will do this to make sure that all advisory groups are as balanced as possible and to avoid as many potential issues with students who have history of not getting along. We also wish to make sure that no one advisor has an unbalanced number of high-need students or behavioral issues to deal with as this may unfairly burden the advisor and could prove detrimental to the advisory group dynamics. This will not solve all issues, but hopefully will reduce any potential issues that may occur.

Day, time, length of meetings. Advisory groups will meet every Wednesday after 2nd hour. To accommodate the advisory time, each class will be shortened by eight

minutes, with the exception of 5th hour so as not to disturb the thirty minute lunch period for students and staff. Each of the other six periods of the day will be 42 minutes in length. Advisory time will run for 38 minutes with a school-standard 5 minute passing time on either end.

Upper grades common activities. During advisory time when ninth grade students and staff are meeting, the upper-grade-level students will be engaged in common activity time. The activity during this time will rotate every week. One week the classes will engage in silent reading time and the next week the student body will be involved in STEM challenge (i.e. all-school trivia, outdoor recreation activity, etc.). The ninth grade advisory groups will be able to be involved in these STEM challenges from time to time as well depending on the needs of the time and activity itself—there will likely be some activities that we would like all students to engage in as this also builds community with advisory groups and with the larger school community.

Advisory Policies

Some policies will need to be in place from the start. We will add other policies as the need arises. We will implement the following policies from the start to help provide organization and order as we begin our work and to head off common issues that we identified in our first trial of advisory and based on some of the recommendations of the interview respondents who currently work in an advisory program.

Students requesting a change of advisory group. Students may request a change of advisory group for any reason. The decision on such a request, will be made with a team of people including the student, the student advisor, the students counselor and, if necessary, the student's parents or guardians. Every effort will be made to maintain the

integrity of the advisory group and the program. These decisions should not be made lightly.

Advisors seeking a change. If advisors seek a change of placement (i.e. to be removed as the advisor of an advisory group or ask that a student be removed from said advisory group) the same procedure will occur and every effort will be made to maintain the integrity of the advisory group and program.

Advisors calling in ill on the day of an advisory meeting. This is likely to happen. If an advisor calls in ill on the day of an advisory meeting, the advisory planning team and administration will work together to find a suitable replacement. We will ask for volunteers to fill in for advisors who are unable to be there on a given day. If a suitable fill-in is not found, an administrator will fill the role or, in an extreme case, the teacher's substitute for the day can fill the role. Every effort should be made to avoid calling in ill on the day of an advisory meeting.

Unknown issues. Other concerns will be dealt with based on the school policies and regulations found in the student handbook or, if the issue is unprecedented, it will be brought to the administration, which will make the ruling. Administration may turn to the advisory planning team who may in turn consult to the rest of the advisors and even advisees if deemed appropriate.

Content Focus.

When taking into account the data gleaned from my interviews with teachers, it is undeniable that they see an advisory program serving to help students build soft skills including collaboration, communication, discipline, planning and organization, etc. Teachers also made it clear that they thought that our particular advisory should also help

students with issues of inquiry and mindset, both very important aspects of our

philosophy.

      Community outreach. As part of the development of soft skills, our advisory will

also work to help students get involved in the school community and gain connection to

the school community. Connection, my research proves, is invaluable for student

development. Advisory should be a place where students feel they have a connection to a

small cohort of people and at least one adult in the building if nothing else, but we would

like to encourage students to connect and get involved in the larger community as well.

      Support of academic work. In terms of academics, teacher interviewees believed

that an advisory could also support the academic work of the classroom by doing grade

and progress checks, providing good, practical examples and tips for achieving academic

success.

Staff Professional Development.

      Cultural competency. In the aim to create a strong, supportive learning

community another aspect of this program needs to be professional development for our

staff related to culturally responsive pedagogy. Our current demographic requires it. With

a population close to 50% students of color and a staff represented by less than 2%

people of color, there is a great need bridge the gap between us. Cultural understanding is

key to making this happen. Our students do not see themselves reflected in us. This is a

serious deficiency and could compromise our ability to be effective educators of our

students. While the advisory program will not provide this directly, the design team, in

partnership with school administration will support and encourage professional

development devoted to culturally responsive pedagogy for our staff. This has already

begun. Two years our district began work with Dr. Sharroky Hollie, an expert in culturally responsive pedagogy, though the expansive professional development project that was panned did not pan out. A book study on the same topic has begun this year throughout the district with small groups of teachers, but there needs to be an earnest commitment training cultural competency for our teachers.

This training can and must come in many forms. A half day workshop will not provide the support our teachers need. This training must be intensive and perpetual. The divide between educators and students of marginalized groups (as discussed in chapter two) is extraordinarily deep and wide and may take years for many teachers to make the journey to the degrees of understanding and compassion necessary to be effective educators and mentors to these students. Professional development should come in the forms including workshops related to cultural competence and culturally relevant pedagogy, guest speakers with expertise and experience in these areas, and book studies. Another form of professional development should include experiences outside one's cultural comfort zone and should be, perhaps must to be, experienced individually. One experience many privileged white people rarely encounter is the feeling of being an outsider immersed in a culture that is not their own where they are minority. This is essential. Educators who truly want to understand the reality of their students of marginalized groups should seek out these instances and do so by visiting a restaurant with ethnic cultural fare and clientele or visiting the home of an acquaintance or student of a different cultural background. Such an experience can be eye opening and should be required activity for those seeking to understand those on the margin.

STEM focused professional development. Along with the development of culturally responsive pedagogy the advisory design team will also encourage and support professional development related to the tenants of STEM education. We have been working on this for two years already, but teachers still struggle to fully grasp what STEM education is and how to successfully incorporate it into their classrooms. Since this is coming to be a fundamental educational philosophy in our school, it will be something that our program must support. We will therefore champion professional development opportunities devoted to it.

Advisory-focused professional development. One of my interviewees who currently works in a school that has a successful advisory program assured me numerous times that "teachers will struggle with the dynamic of an advisory group. To really work, these groups have to be organic, allowed to breathe and go where the students and advisor need to take it. And this will be very difficult for some your advisors." Considering this, I think it is imperative that our advisory design team prepare and implement professional development dedicated to how an advisory works, the advisor's and advisees' role. Adding these layers of PD will greatly benefit the advisory program and the school as a whole.

Five Main Goals

Beyond these basic elements and policies, our advisory program will be built around five main goals. Borrowing from Willens' (2013) three indicators of a student's likelihood to succeed (attendance, behavior, and course performance) and from the insight of Bottoms (2008) five factors students need to put forth the effort to succeed, I have built the basis of what I believe will be a strong advisory program.

Attendance, behavior, and course performance. It is difficult to affect these three factors directly. We can talk to students about the importance of attendance. We can promote proper behavior, tell them what it looks like, what is and is not acceptable in high school, and we can explain why it is important to put forth their best effort at all times and perform to the highest standard in all matters. None of this, however, is likely to change anything in most cases. Talk is not effective if the relationship between parties is weak or impersonal. Educators know that teaching is about relationships and this is what gives an advisory program potential. With the creation of small cohort groups that meet at regular intervals comes the possibility of connection and connection can foster individual relationships. What we do in advisory, built on a foundation of personal relationship, will have a good likelihood of having an effect on student behavior. These three factors then will be the information we can use to gauge the effectiveness of our program. The advisory program will be built on the following five goals.

Advisory Goal 1: Advisees Will More Effectively Transition To ninth grade

In our school we have a regular day-to-day schedule. Class periods are 50 minutes long, passing time between classes is five minutes, and classes get 30 minutes for lunch during 1 of 3 lunch periods based on the last name of a students 5th hour teacher. It is pretty straightforward. However, we also have 7 alternate schedules. One schedule for afternoon long assembly, one for afternoon short assembly, one for afternoon theater assembly, extended second period, and so on. During a typical week it is highly likely we will have at least one day with an alternate schedule and we often have two alternate schedules in a week. Last year, early in the fall trimester, one of our young, new teachers cried in the principal's office because she could not get a handle on the fluctuating

schedules. This was an exceptionally complex fall in terms of scheduling. It is not typically quite so bad, even so, if a teacher struggles with a situation like this it is bound to be just as confusing and frustrating, if not more, for a transitioning ninth grade student who is already under stress.

As discussed in chapter two, McCallumore & Sparapani (2010) claim that the transition from middle school to high school is the greatest factor leading to the success or failure of a student's high school career. They indicate that as much as 40% of high school students suffer some significant problems during and following this transition. One logical reason students struggle so much during this change is a lack of understanding of the difference between these two institutions. In order to help them through this transition students need a clear understanding of the rules and expectations of high school. If they do not understand the expectations they cannot live up to them.

Rules and expectations. Our school has the strictest dress code in the district. We do not allow students to wear hats, we ask that they do not wear tank tops, sagging pants that reveal their underwear, longs pocket chains, etc. This change is a struggle for many students. As they come into high school, students are also expected to keep track of their own assignments and turn them in on time. Students are expected to study on their own for tests, do project research and drafting at home, and balance their time between life, school, extra curricular activities, friends, work, and family. We expect them to be self-motivated, self-reliant, and to do good work and keep good grades. This is nothing new, of course, as many of these same expectations were in place in the middle school, but students still struggle to keep up with their work and do the quality work that is expected of them.

They struggle to create positive work habits and balance the obligations of life. In part, I suppose, the reason for these struggles is developmental. Many students at this age struggle because they are still developing cognitively. The problem, as was discussed in chapter 2, also has a lot to do with the practice of social promotion in middle school. Students do not need to work hard or get their work in on time because there is not threat of failure. Sure they fail classes but it has no bearing on their future. They will move to the next stage regardless. The problem is that when you take this mentality into the new landscape of high school, where grades do matter, where students can be held back a grade, where if grades are not up to par a student may not be able to play sports or get into college. Grades play a significant part of a student's future success. Many freshmen are not prepared for this and it is likely to hurt them if they do not figure it out early in their high school career. Ninth grade students need to start strong or risk a far more difficult time later trying to patch the damage of their early months in high school.

Advisory can help students navigate the difficult and often foreign-seeming environment of high school. In an advisory, students can ask the necessary questions to help them understand the rules and expectations. An advisor can help students prepare for the changing schedules and reiterate the need to get focused early. An advisory can check in with students on a regular basis and on a very personal level and learn just what each individual student is struggling with. This knowledge can then be used to help the advisor help the student personally or direct the student to the people who can help them whether that is the student's math teacher for help with a difficult theorem, or the physical education teacher to explain why a student does not have the clothes necessary to participate in activities, etc. An advisor can help students by becoming the go-to person

for questions and their primary advocate in the building greatly, aiding in the transition from middle to high school.

Early on in our advisory programming students and advisors will have targeted, though not scripted, discussions about the rules and policies that exist in our school. Students will be able to ask questions about why policies exist. Advisors can provide insight into why the policies exist and how they are designed to help students and teachers be successful in the process of education. If students have a better understanding of the policies and rules, they will be more likely to remember and follow them in the future than if they are simply listed "do-nots" on a poster or in a student handbook. Context breeds understanding. This small effort may go a long way toward the improvement in behavior of our young students. Along with providing students support in understanding the ins and outs our high school system of rules and expectations, advisors will also provide regular academic support and advising.

Advisory Goal 2: Advisees Will Get Regular Academic Support and Advising

Supporting students and the academic work of the classroom is extremely important if we want to help students succeed. And evidence suggests that with regular academic support provided by an adult in the building to whom they feel connected, students tend have better attendance and are less likely to drop out of school (DiMartino and Miles, 2006). This is the kind of supportive environment we wish to create at our school. Even academic support, although it might seem dull on paper, can create a sense of connection for a student to at least one adult in the building. Our advisors will be expected to guide students toward more successful and meaningful academic experience by using and recommending the following tools and resources.

Grade checks. At least once a month advisors should check in individually with each of their advisees to look at current grades and discuss any issues with completion, quality of work, tests and quiz scores, and overall classroom work. If issues seem to be present, the advisor should discuss them with the student and suggest possible solutions to the problem and make a plan for improvement.

Tutoring opportunities. If a student seems to have continuous struggles in a particular subject, the advisor might talk to the student about the possibility of meeting with a tutor. There are a number of tutoring opportunities at our school and in the community. The math department offers several math help sessions throughout the day when a particular teacher is available for walk-in math help. We also have tutors who come in to work with certain groups and a peer-tutoring program. Any of these could be very beneficial to students who need a little extra help.

Goal setting. Goal setting is a very important part of the advisory program and should be taken seriously. Advisors should create goals for themselves to model goal setting for students. Advisors will help students set smart goals at the beginning of each trimester and review goals periodically throughout the trimester to gauge progress and suggest action toward goal completion. Both advisors and advisees should keep each other accountable for their goals by working together to keep one another on track and check in on progress regularly.

Tips for academic success. As presented in chapter two, ninth grade students are the most likely to struggle academically. They tend to carry the lowest GPA and fail the most classes. They also tend to have the worst attendance of all grade levels in high school (to McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010) so, helping them understand the pitfalls that

many freshman students fall victim to and how to avoid them is one of the most important things an advisor can do to help students navigate the world of high-school academics.

Transition to high school. A common theme throughout the advisory program should be the transition to high school from middle school. Advisors need to remind students that high school is a different landscape. Grades truly matter now and students need to take their coursework seriously. Advisors can help prepare students for this change by sharing examples of student experiences, both successful and not.

Study skills. Something that many students seem to struggle with is simply how to study. This is a skill that needs to be taught, but there is little time in the classroom to teach study skills. This is where an advisory group can step in to support the work of the classroom. The small numbers in an advisory would allow for one-on-one coaching on note taking, attentive listening, and the like.

Coping with stress. All students struggle with the stress of getting good grades. However, grades and completing schoolwork are only the beginning of the life demands for the average student. All students have other stressors as well. Many of our students work, some to earn spending money and some to contribute to their family income. Many of our students play sports or are involved in other competitive activities beyond the school day. Some of our students attend church or worship multiple days out of the week or have to care for their siblings, make dinner for the family, or any number of other possible responsibilities. Coping with the stress that comes with all the demands of life and, for our freshmen, the new demands of high school is something that advisors will need to address and work on with students. There are many stress-reliving activities that

we can recommend including exercise, yoga or meditation, game play, journaling and many other options we can introduce to students as ways to cope with stress.

Advisory Goal 3: Advisees Will Develop A Sense of Connection

This transition from 8th grade to ninth grade, I think I have established, can be a very difficult year for students. It is often marked by loneliness and can lead to isolation and a feeling of great disconnection (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Students, however, need to feel connected to the school and the people in it in order to be comfortable, safe and content. It is only when these needs are met that students are truly poised to learn to their greatest potential. An advisory can work to help students create this needed sense connection, lessen the feeling of isolation and, as Creamer (2006) phrased it, "to counteract the anonymity" of large institutions.

According to Nield (2009), when schools are organized around community and the importance of genuine, personal relationships are emphasized among teachers and students, students tend to see more gains in their learning than in schools where these relationships are less important or less central to the school's philosophy.

One of the most important goals of this advisory program will be to create this much needed and beneficial connection among students and teachers. Our advisory will help students feel connected to and feel known by at least one adult, their group advisor, in the building. This advisory program will also emphasis the importance of the relationship among students and their peers, and their connection to the outside community. In order to create this sense of connection our advisory program will focus on a few key things.

Community building activities. This program will give us a great opportunity to engage in significant community building activities in both our ninth-grade advisory groups and for the rest of the school population. While our ninth grade advisory groups are meeting, our upper-grade level classes will be either reading or engaging specifically in community building activities in the form of our STEM challenges. Our advisory groups will participate in some of these activities with the rest of the school but will also engage in regular community building activities with their advisor and peers. One of the most important factors in advisory is helping students create connection to one another, to the greater school community and to their advisor. Advisors will be encouraged to enjoy food, play games, and engage in active learning activities to help create this connection in their groups.

Advisor one-on-one time. Students will engage in regular one-on-one meeting with their advisor to conduct grade checks, have academic progress discussions about their goals, and to just talk about how things are going for them in the ninth grade. These one-on-one meetings give the advisor and advisee ample opportunity to get to know one another and help each student feel known personally, and cared for, by an important adult in their lives.

Awareness of opportunities. Advisors will be encouraged to find out what students are interested in and to talk to them specifically about sports, clubs, arts and activities available to students at our school. We want students to be involved, and involvement also helps to create connection to individuals and to the community.

Advisory Goal 4: Advisees Will Develop Long-term Vision For Their Future Through Career Exploration and Course Planning

Goal setting. Goal setting will be a very important part of the advisory experience for students and advisors. In order to be successful one has to have something to work toward and must move toward each end systematically, setting benchmarks and milestones. In order to achieve long-term goals many shorter tem goals will need to be met. Part of the advisory "curriculum" will be to help students understand the importance of setting and working toward goals. Advisors will model the setting of goals and help students work through the process of creating smart, attainable and measurable goals and will check with advisees regularly to assess their progress. Advisees will be asked to hold one another accountable for their goals as well.

Career exploration. Many students do not know what they want to do as a career; some do. Either way it is very important for students to have the opportunity to explore career opportunities that they know about, are interested in, and to learn about industries and opportunities they never knew existed. Our counselors do a good job of this with some of our students, but it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to do it effectively with all 1650 students in our building. We will lean on their expertise to help and train our advisors to use the many tools at their disposal to aid their advisees through significant exploration of school and career opportunities, help them understand what each require as far as schooling, credentials, experience and grades.

Naviance. Our school counselors use an impressive application called Naviance to help students with their college and career exploration. Naviance provides students with a career and interest assessment to suggest possible futures for our students and works as a

portal for looking into what is required to get into a particular school or land a position in certain industry. This application is used mostly in the ninth grade already, so it will not be a stretch to expand its use into our advisory.

Course planning. Advisors will also guide students through our registration process, but will also use the opportunity to aid students in choosing course offerings to tailor the students' school experience to fit their interests and goals. Advisors will also be able to suggest or at least bring awareness of the many possibilities available to students including courses on site, at different schools in the district, post secondary education opportunities (PSEO), and STEM pathways.

STEM Pathways. As a STEM institution, we offer great, prebuilt course pathways to different industries from computer engineering to medical care. Advisors can help students understand these opportunities and what it takes to get involved in these very rich and incredible opportunities. Many of the courses are offered at our school, but there are also many different possibilities at our local community colleges and partner companies as well. Advisory can help students explore what they wish to do after high school and aid them along the way to achieve what they need to achieve in order to reach their goals.

Advisory Goal 5: Advisees Will Take More Personal Responsibility In Their Education and Develop Skills Needed To Be Successful

As discussed earlier in this chapter, what advisory is best able to do is help students build soft skills. These skills are necessary to be successful and so our advisory program will spend a great deal of time and effort helping students understand the importance of, and how to develop, these skills.

Grit / resilience. Angela Duckworth (2016) explains in her book, *Grit*, that grit is essentially a "combination of passion and perseverance" (p. 8). She explains that grit seems to be a trait that is found in highly successful people, perhaps universally, and that each of the people she studied seemed to all have a similar make up that included resiliency, a tendency to be very hard-working, were determined and had clear direction (Duckworth, 2016). These are traits we can help students develop and foster in an advisory program built on close relationships and trust. We can help students build confidence and encourage them to stick with things until they get it right. Without this guidance, whether from home, school, church, etc., many students fail to build the grit necessary to be successful.

Interpersonal communication. As discussed earlier in this chapter, interpersonal communication is a very important skill for students to learn. Many students struggle to communicate effectively with both adults and peers. Being skilled in interpersonal communication can help students advocate for themselves and collaborate with others more effectively. In some cases students are intimidated by the idea of confronting their teachers about a grade book mistake or trouble with an assignment. An advisor could guide the student through this process, encourage and coach them, or even accompany them to a discussion with a teacher. These are skills everyone needs and an advisory group will focus on effective communication with students through group discussion and activities.

Time-management. Like many other soft skills, time-management is not a skill that is directly taught in school, yet it is a very necessary thing for students to be able to do well. Students are often bombarded with obligations including homework, clubs or

activities, the demands of their home and family, obligations to friends, church, sports, work and many more things. Many students find it difficult to manage and prioritize their time well. This can result in a failure to get work done on time or leads to a situation where there is little time left to complete a given task and quality suffers. Students struggle to use their time well when studying and very often are over-tired from staying up late to complete work or do other things that they did not have time to complete during the day. This skill can be developed with some guidance and the proper tools like a planner, personal calendar, lists, etc. Advisors could help students work on healthy time management skills by modeling behavior and helping students set up a sustainable workflow they can use day to day.

Work ethic. The ability to work through a problem at length, to read and comprehend the complex, sustained argument, to work through the process of trial and error requires commitment, discipline, and maybe a little grit. Work ethic seems to be a struggle for students today and arguments abound as to the cause. Some believe it has to do with the proliferation of technology (especially mobile technology) and students' dependence upon it. And some will tell you it's a sense of apathy, that students just don't care enough to spend the time required to do good quality work. And some argue that this is nothing new, that students throughout time have resisted intellectual toil in favor of fleeting, superficial entertainment and the like. Perhaps the apparent aversion to hard work is the sum of all of these things, or none, or something else entirely. Whatever is responsible for this aversion is unclear, but what can help individuals build a strong work ethic are the modeling, guidance and support that an advisory teacher can provide.

Creative problem solving. It is often touted as modern fact that we have to prepare students for future jobs that do not even exist today. I do not deny this idea, but champion it. Even if the mantra turns out to be untrue, it benefits students to be able to think in different ways and to see things from different perspectives. We do need our young people today to be able solve problems creatively as it is rather likely they will encounter issues that we cannot even conceive today. As a STEM school this becomes a very significant shift in thinking for both our staff and student body and will need to be an important focus in what we do in advisory. We can complete activities and play games that require students to shift their thinking and solve problems in creative ways.

Collaboration. This is one of the skills that employers note as one of great importance time and time again. People today need to be able to work with others effectively both in person and remotely. Modern technology makes remote connection and collaboration from long distances easy and relatively smooth, making collaboration near or far a common, even daily, occurrence. Students need to become comfortable with group collaboration and the interpersonal communication that goes along with it. The small group makeup of this advisory program will lend itself well to situations of communication and collaboration with the advisor serving as a coach and a participant of the process supporting students in their development of skills.

Summary

There are many problems that exist for high schools students, but from my vantage point two of the most significant issues include the arduous transition from middle to high school and the depersonalized size and structure of today's secondary schools. This project has been a long time in the making. From the first attempt at

advisory programming a number of years ago to the completion of this project, I have continually maintained my resolve that an advisory program could be one of the most substantial, structural shifts that a school can make to help students through this transition and to provide a more supportive and personalized educational experience.

Like any initiative the design should be tailored to the community it is designed to serve. There are no universal solutions. Each school has its own population and needs and these characteristics cannot be assumed. In designing an advisory program for our school I had to take stock of our assets and our deficits to create a program to address these things as effectively as possible. Much of the research supported my belief about the transformative possibility that advisory can bring. In talking with our many teachers I was able to gather a great deal of information related to what we do well and can improve, and where we struggle to prepare our students. I used this information to identify points of focus for this advisory program.

In speaking with teachers of other buildings who work in advisory programs I was able to glean from them some of the major pitfalls that they have experienced in creating and working in a similar program so I could work to avoid the same issues from the start. These teachers also presented great advice on things that have worked well for them, and I tried to build many of these recommendations into my design.

In chapter five I will discuss what I learned from the process of completing this project and from the research that went into the literature review. I will also discuss the implications and limitations of the study and make recommendations for further research on the subjects of this project.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

<u>What I Learned About Process</u>

Throughout this project I learned just how challenging an in-depth research process could be. I learned how important the writing process is in doing something of this magnitude. In researching and writing this, I did not really use the typical, meticulous process I normally use. This is ironic as I have taught the writing process to students for years and I know the importance of it, but against my better judgment, I did not necessarily follow it through as I have done in the past. I attempted to use new methods of gathering and archiving my research, and I changed my workflow a number of times, so consistency was a major issue. I suffered greatly because of this.

I also learned that committing to a plan and sticking with it is important as well. I changed my focus for this project a number of times and was forced to rewrite each time I made a major shift. I should have remained focused on my original plan; I would have been done long ago. Due to these ill-advised shifts in my project focus, inconsistencies in my research process and workflow, and the expansive timeframe of the project itself (in many ways due to the faults in my approach), things got very messy. Articles ended up archived on different digital platforms. Some writing ended up here or there, and I ended up, over time, with a puzzle that required great effort to piece back together. On the bright side, I suppose, I will have a story to share with students about the importance of the writing process and what can happen if you do not follow a consistent method throughout a project.

Project Scope

Regarding the subject of the project, I learned that creating and maintaining a working and viable advisory program is very difficult work. I had never orchestrated something of its scale before. It is quite amazing what goes into something like this. There is so much time and effort on things that go on behind the scenes that most people never see. This has seriously changed my perspective on initiatives of this size and type. Going into something like this on the design end of things requires a very significant commitment, and I have no doubt I will certainly be involved in other large-scope projects of this type, but it will have to be the right thing at the right time, and must be something I truly believe in before I can justify the time and effort it takes. I hope that I do have the opportunity to work on building an advisory program in the future. It is certainly something I still very much believe in.

In completing this project I also learned a little bit about workplace politics. I often think back to when I worked on my undergraduate degree in education. For a number of years in the summers I worked at a local landscape supply store and nursery as a grounds-keeper and truck driver. While there, I became friendly with a gentleman who was a retired high school science teacher. He often advised me to think about doing something other than teaching. He enjoyed teaching for the many years he worked in education, but, as he often said, he could not stand the politics. He would tell me that that the students were always great, even the *knuckleheads*, but it was the politics that drained him and the reason he left education earlier than he planned. I never knew exactly what he meant by that, but I got a taste of it when I tried to implement this program into our school early on. Things got messy and there were politics involved that I still do not

completely understand. If I were to do this, or something like it, again I would move forward in a much more measured and cautious way.

<u>Back to the Literature Review</u>

The transition from middle to high school is difficult for most and can be traumatic for others. Students are not only dealing with a major shift in the school structure that they are used to, but there are often major life changed that they are dealing with at the same time. I know that adolescence can be a very challenging time for young people, and I know that the shift from one school to another can also be taxing, but before this project I had not really compounded these two (or more) forces together, but rather thought of them as two very different experiences. Students struggle at home and they struggle at school, but of course these two facets of student life are both part of the same individual struggle. It is hard to explain why this did not consciously occur to me before. Really, I think it did in a sense. As a teacher we know that all students struggle at home and that they bring those struggles to school. We know that those struggles at home can have a very serious affect on their learning. I have known that the connection exists, but I realize now that there was not an active link in my head that, like now, exists in my understanding of the student experience. This is a very abstract idea that I can only vaguely explain, but I do recognize a significant shift in my understanding of student life as a result of the research I conducted.

I have also come to understand that this transitional period, while difficult and challenging for all students, can be especially trying for students of color as they are forced to not only recalibrate to their new environment, to a new set of expectations, policies and other challenges at a time when they are also struggling with self identity

development but are also likely grappling with their racial/ethnic identity as well (French, Seidman & Allen, 2000). The weight of this is massive. Essentially, for our students of color, this period of transition is potentially a developmental crisis twofold. Again, the need to address the needs, personalize the educational experience and to support all of our students is great, but specifically for our students of color the need is truly and exceedingly vital.

It has also become clear that the structure of a school and the school climate can have a very isolating and alienating effect on students. From the compartmentalization of disciplines, greater school populations, less direct contact with other known students, less direct connection with teachers due to class caseload and time spent in their presence, the structure of the institution can weigh heavily on students. I think as educators who often work for many years in a building, we often take the rules and policies for granted. We understand how things work and, in many cases, why they work as they do, but forget that students often do not have the same level of knowledge. It is important that students not only know what the rules and expectations are, but why they exist. It is also important that building staff regularly review school policies to make sure that they make sense as sometimes policies that no longer make sense remain in force long after they become obsolete simply because that is the way it has always been. It is also of great importance that we continually review policies to make sure our practices are not unnecessarily biased for or against any groups of students as some of our school policies and structures certainly may be racially and or culturally biased. We owe it to our students to make sure our school supports and encourages them rather than working as additional barriers in the way of their progress and development.

Another of the more astounding findings for me was the idea that past performance does not necessarily predict high school performance. Students who performed well, no failing classes and a decent attendance record in middle school were still very likely to perform poorly in ninth grade. This implies that something significant and problematic is occurring during the ninth grade year that plays a big part in students' struggle. At the same time, success in ninth grade is a very strong predictor of future success. This again points to the great importance of the ninth grade year and, more than anything else, justifies in my mind the undeniable need to provide individualized support for all students during this crucial year.

<u>Implications</u>

The ninth grade experience is somewhat paradoxical. In order to be successful in high school and beyond, the ninth grade year is pivotal; however, ninth grade also poses serious difficulty for students, whether they have been successful in the past or not. Something happens in ninth grade that causes students who have previously enjoyed great success to falter. Many major life changes tend to occur at this time. The difficulty could be a struggle with the transition itself, moving from one school to another and the challenges that come with it. But many students also wrestle with other significant changes at this time. The difficulty could also have something to do with personal life changes outside of school in the family or with friends. It could also have a great deal to do with adolescence and changes occurring in the maturing body. It could be a combination of some or all of these things, or something completely different and is likely different for each and every student. Whatever it is, the implication is that students need the support of the adults in their lives to be successful during this time, but it also

seems to point to the existence of a potentially inherent conundrum of our schooling system and more needs to be done, in terms of research, to uncover exactly what happens in the ninth grade that makes it so difficult for students.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations in this project. If I were to do this again, I would conduct more research on brain science, specifically cognition and brain development in students in and around ninth grade. The age-appropriate brain development at this age could tell us a great deal about how students of this age function and think and might provide great insight into their thought process and possibly help us to understand what their struggles might be in this period of great transition. I would also conduct more extensive research on culturally responsive teaching practices and the need for culturally similar role models. We need to better understand the lives of all of our students in order to truly provide them with the support they need to be successful. We need to also be vigilant that our current and future practices and policies do not exacerbate the problematic trend of institutionalized racism and prejudice in our school system. Future work should obviously look to break down these barriers and avoid the same pitfalls going forward.

One glaring omission from this work is research and informative data based on district AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) ideals. Our district has a thriving AVID program and the program in our particular school is one of the best. The AVID program has been extremely successful throughout the district. The program is designed to do a lot of what an advisory program would aim to do and it would have been

very beneficial to work with our AVID team on this project to draw off of their already existing research and build some of their best practices into the advisory.

Another limitation to this capstone has to do with the scope of the project itself. I believe that a truly ideal advisory program is one that supports every student throughout his or her entire high school career. A full school advisory, I think, would be more beneficial in the long run for students as problems and conflicts in high school certainly do not disappear magically at the end of freshman year. For this project, in reality—the first time through—and then again for this capstone, I created the plan the school wanted which was rot with concession for us in the original planning team. Ninth grade is obviously a pivotal time for students, but I do not believe that the support we afford high school students should end after their first year.

After my tenth grade year I moved to a different school within the same district. I continued to receive the support that began with Mr. J. after my injury. The support was different, but it still made all the difference to me. I continued to struggle throughout my high school experience, and I had specific, and constantly shifting, needs that my case manager was able to identify, help me to work though, and helped me to persevere. What I have learned working in education for over a decade is that all students, no matter their ability level, have needs and need individualized support. Some students make it through just fine on their own; some students limp along, struggle endlessly, but come out all right on the other side. Some students need constant support. An advisory program could work to provide each student with their very personal needs and help them all be more successful in the end.

<u>Recommended Future Research</u>

More research on the benefits of advisory programing is needed. I believe that the potential benefits of an effectively run program. My research has confirmed this potential. Still, more case studies and different variations of advisory programs need to continue to be developed, to be more easily adaptable to the many and varied institutions that exist in our nation.

It would also be beneficial to conduct more studies on the cognitive development of ninth-grade students and the effects of the middle to high school transition. Some of the questions I would like answered include: Do effects vary for students in different settings (i.e. urban vs. rural), for different sized institutions, for different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, etc.? Do effects differ for students who make this transition earlier, later, or more than once? And what are the effects of this transition on students of marginalized groups? Research on this topic in particular I found especially lacking and especially needed if we wish to help our students of color overcome the achievement gap we talk so much about. Talk, as they say, is cheap. It is time for action.

We also need to continue to explore other models of student support practices in public schools. Perhaps there are more efficient ways of providing support for students. I wonder if technology might provide a way for educators to provide beneficial support to students as well? Although I expect that technology-aided support would not be as effective as face-to-face support, it might be worth exploring how technology could be used to assist or enhance one-on-one supportive efforts.

I am sure there are many other aspects of student support that could be helpful to investigate as well. What I know is that positive, supportive relationships are incredibly

important for student development and can greatly improve the likelihood of success and achievement in our students. Pundits and policymakers often overlook this aspect of education, but teachers need to find the avenues to create supportive relationships with students in a way that is effective, yet not overly burdensome to the already overworked public educator. Any research in and around this issue is a worthwhile endeavor.

Summary

Advisory can significantly help students through the difficult transition into ninth grade and can provide support and help students find success throughout their high school career, but it is not a fix-all solution. I believe that an advisory program can help students traverse a school system that, for ninth grade students who are just entering, can be new and very confusing. I think our schooling system can be a very confusing place in general, with constantly shifting pedagogical approaches implemented to different degrees and in differing ways, with assessment structures and the like that are antithetical to what we know about how people learn, and many, many other problems. We have a lot to do if we truly want to turn high school education into an institution that truly benefits our students in the ways we believe it can. An advisory program is a means to help students be successful in a complicated system by supporting them through it, answering their questions, knowing and caring for them on a personal level thereby counteracting the anonymity of a large and often impersonal high school institution.

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