

# Designing Advisories

*Well-done advisory programs foster students' strengths and support organizational resilience.*

**Jeffrey Benson and Rachel E. Poliner**

**W**e've heard it in urban and suburban schools alike. When designing advisory programs, considering resilience as an organizing theme makes sense.

Many urban educators and school leaders we work with have students who must persevere in the face of underresourced schools, schooling practices that focus on student deficits, and poverty-related obstacles to

learning. Many of their students are managing trauma without sufficient support systems, self-management skills, or learned optimism (Seligman, 1991).

Suburban teachers and school leaders we work with, especially in wealthier suburbs, speak of students who are unhealthily competing for top grades, high-status roles, and acceptance into exclusive high schools and universities. Their students face enormous pressure to measure up to

unreasonable standards of perfection. They are managing intense stress, also without sufficient self-management skills, learned optimism, or effective supports.

All these educators recognize that their students need resilience to overcome significant daily challenges, persevere on tasks, and identify and reach their goals. They recognize advisory as a structure that can nurture that resilience.

### What Does An Advisory Do?

In an advisory program, students meet regularly with a small group of peers and an advisor over multiple years; such programs give every student a mentor. Advisory groups can include activities or discussions, but they aren't academic classes. Advisor–advisee interactions are low-pressure and supportive. Advisories build community; they promote academic success, social-emotional learning, and postsecondary planning; and they can support the community when tragedies occur.

### Elements of Effective Advisories

We've helped schools implement new advisory programs or diagnose struggling ones using the “advisory

design puzzle” from *The Advisory Guide: Designing and Implementing Effective Advisory Programs in Secondary Schools* (Poliner & Miller Lieber, 2004). The puzzle has nine components: goals, content, materials, groupings, schedule, advisor's role, professional development, assessment, and links to school mission and context. These design elements are our reference when schools tell us they've “tried advisory, and it didn't work.”

When we asked staff members at one school how long they tried advisory, we found they'd cut the program after 18 months, professional development had been voluntary and short-lived, and they didn't have mechanisms to collect feedback and adjust as needed. When

students stumble, we want them to dust themselves off, consider what they could do better, forgive their mistakes, and try again. We need to hold the same expectations for adults and school programs.

Here's what these nine elements might look like in a school that wants its advisory program to focus on resilience.

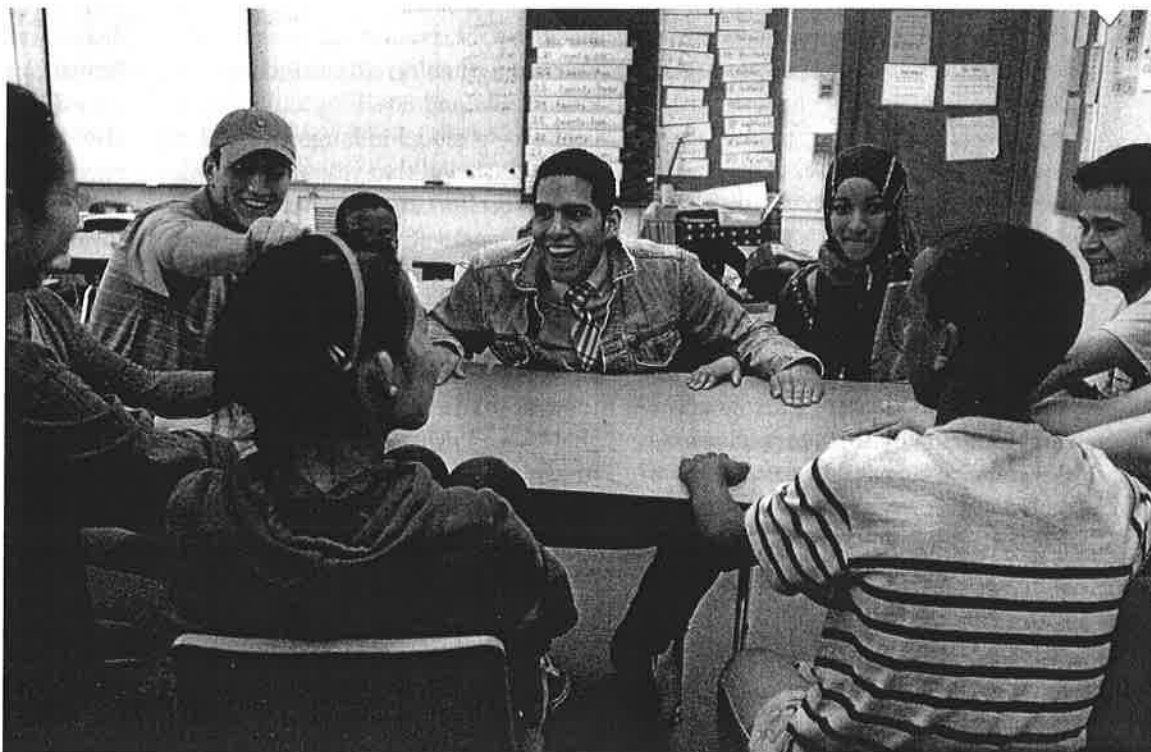
### The Advisor Role

Implementing an advisory program calls for a stretch of the traditional teacher's role to focus not primarily on content, but rather on the kids themselves. An effective advisory session might have activities, discussions, and routines—familiar territory to teachers—but they are tied to an aspect of youth development or community building. It's not surprising that many new advisors feel awkward.

We've heard some advisors describe their awkwardness in the new role as if it were a permanent state and therefore a program flaw. Other advisors alter the plans so activities are more like

# for Resilience

When a school takes time for advisory, it gives the message that **knowing and supporting kids are at the center** of its mission.



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those in a class, the advisor's comfort zone. A teacher might replace a "turn-and-talk" with writing three sentences, or keep chairs in rows instead of forming a circle so advisees face one another. These teachers may feel more comfortable in the short term, but they aren't taking the risk of learning to be an advisor.

In a January 2011 *60 Minutes* interview, jazz musician Wynton Marsalis said, "if you're not making mistakes, you're not trying"—sound advice for students and advisors. Both new and experienced advisors need to be resilient, expect to stumble at times, work at improving, and forgive themselves for mistakes.

How can the design team and principal help teachers stretch to become advisors? It helps to be conscious of language. The words *teacher*, *student*, and *class period* evoke academic images. Schools can be careful to consistently use the words *advisor*, *advisee*, and *advisory meeting* to help adults make the shift. It's essential that the adults see advisory as a set of relationships, not just a time slot.

The advisor role needs to be carefully articulated. Even when resilience is the overall goal, design teams need to determine which aspects of resilience they'll focus on: academic challenges, risky teen situations, envisioning a positive future, managing stress, or ensuring that everyone has a support system for a crisis. Regarding discipline challenges, should the advisor be directly involved or act as a behind-the-scenes coach? Will advisors play a central role in making referrals and contacting parents and caregivers? If advisors are unclear about the responsibilities and limits of their role, they may shape their role around personal preferences instead of the larger vision for the program (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

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### *Professional Development*

School leaders and design teams need to provide thorough professional development to prepare advisors. The most effective workshops have the same feel as an advisory group—a small size, with rituals to establish a sense of community. Having small workshops can be difficult, especially in large schools, but they're that much more important because advisors, like advisees, may have forgotten what a more intimate atmosphere feels like or how to create one.

Many advisor skills take time to develop. Needham High School in Needham, Massachusetts, spent a year strengthening advisors' communication and coaching skills. Their goal was to model in language used by adults the belief that what mattered most was effort and perseverance, two hallmarks of resilience. The school's leadership team read *Mindset* by Carol Dweck (Random House, 2006). Advisory committee members led workshops on coaching skills for the rest of the faculty at which they shared readings on Dweck's concept of a growth versus a fixed-intelligence mind-set. Principal Jonathan Pizzi focused instructional rounds on how classroom practices could foster resilience throughout the day.

This learning changed teachers' language. For instance, faculty committed themselves to avoid saying "good luck" to students, because they wanted to underscore that success was about effort and preparation, not the capriciousness of luck.

*Content, Format, Rituals, and Materials* Krovetz (1999) lists four attributes resilient people share: social competence, autonomy, problem-solving skills, and sense of purpose and future. Your school can plan advisory sessions and routines to nurture these attributes. For example, advisory sessions can include discussions, reflections, and exercises to expand advisees' goal-setting, self-assessment, negotiation, collaboration, and communication skills.

It's important to note, however, that resilience is a habit of mind and a skill set that takes practice, not a string of one-time activities. A given activity might introduce an aspect of listening or speaking, but the best way to build these skills is to have a ritual of frequent conversations on topics important to advisees. Advisors can help the group craft norms for good discussions, use varied discussion formats and techniques, and coach advisees when needed. Advisors might also discuss resilience and lead role-plays about what a person who is resilient might say, do, or think after, say, failing a test.

Other activities and routines help develop additional attributes of resilience. Many advisees need help managing time and tasks. Advisories can have a weekly ritual to manage last week's undone tasks and this week's to-do list, which gives students practice at planning and dealing with frustration.

Service projects, demonstrations of advisees' hobbies and passions, and

activities to explore careers foster a sense of meaning and future. Exercises and discussions about making healthy decisions contribute to skills for autonomy. Formats and activities that promote team building and leadership build social competencies, as do rituals for sharing stories, hopes, losses, and triumphs. Having established rituals is crucial for when crises arise.

For example, at Natick High School in Natick, Massachusetts, many “Community Seminar” advisory groups use a ritual that asks about high or low moments in advisees’ lives during the last week. They celebrate accomplishments and offer support and problem solving for challenges. Advisees who share that they got a part-time job or finished a science project on time are acknowledged for successes that are often marginalized in the school’s academic culture. Students who are falling behind in their homework hear that they’re not alone and sometimes find partners for study sessions.

Some specific practices take time to establish. These include listening carefully and respectfully, having creative problem-solving conversations, and using self-assertion skills to seek support—all while ensuring that a sense of safety underlies the whole discussion. Schools may take many steps and a few years to establish such practices.

Most schools will find it useful to plan out the advisory sessions and rituals for the first two to three years, distributing materials that include many low-threat go-rounds, norm-setting exercises, and specific activities on problem solving, healthy decision making, and respectful assertion. As advisors’ skills deepen, planning teams can offer more flexible plans. Eventually, groups can generate their own conversations organically.



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### *Scheduling*

It takes time to tell personal stories, sustain problem-solving discussions, and participate in meaningful exercises and projects. Both Washburne Middle School in Winnetka, Illinois, and Needham High School changed their advisory schedule when they made resilience a goal.

Washburne Middle School has had advisories since the 1920s. During the early 2000s, the program focused primarily on academics. Only core subject-area teachers served as advisors, and groups met at the end of every day for short blocks of time. That time was sufficient to check on assignments, overdue homework, and backpack organization, but it wasn’t enough once the school began to refocus advisories on social and emotional learning in 2008. After much research and exploration, Washburne crafted its program around the four Rs of relationships, responsibility, resilience, and reflection. The school got all faculty members involved to make

smaller groups and redesigned the schedule so advisory could meet twice per week for 30 minutes each time.

Needham High School wasn’t prepared to reinvent the school schedule; few schools have that luxury. Instead, groups meet midmorning every day for 10-minute advisories and monthly for an additional 40-minute block of time. Brad Walker, the social-emotional learning committee chair, explains:

Because we have an irregular rotating schedule, the advisor is the only adult who sees a given student every day. Our daily meetings allow for advisor–advisee contact and check-ins, whereas our monthly meetings allow for longer discussions, community building, and skill-building experiences.

### *Groupings*

Fostering resilience requires advisors to know their individual students and the hurdles they face. Small groups are best. Advisor Marc Seiden from Boston Green Academy, a charter school in the Boston public schools, described the school’s 2012 grouping dilemma:

We had really big advisory groups—20 or so kids. All groups had two advisors, but it didn't matter. Kids would get to the room, see it was a big group, which felt like a class, so they acted like it was a class—passive, deferring to authority—instead of acting like it was advisory—sharing ownership and participating.

Several of the school's advisory groups opted to split in two, finding alternative spaces to meet. They made relationships and ownership of the group the priority.

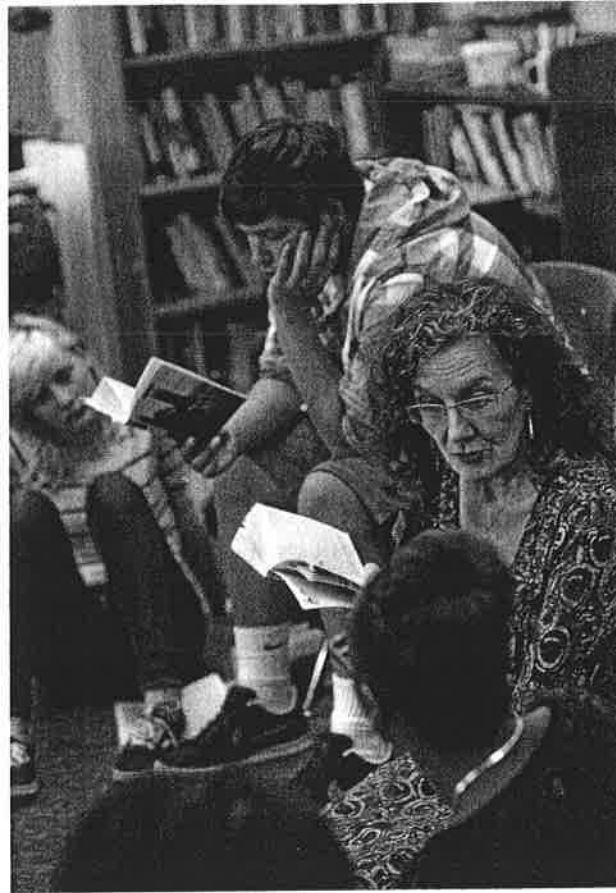
Grouping involves not just the size of the group, but also the mix and continuity. Some schools have grade-level groups; others have mixed-grade groups. Both arrangements can work (if aligned well with goals and content). However, all the schools mentioned here keep their groups together as long as they can, looping over multiple years.

Advisors who stay with advisees over multiple grades can experience a connection they couldn't develop in a single academic year.

Groupings can affect the overall school culture, making it more supportive, helping kids feel known, and lessening divisions.

### *Aligning with School Mission and Context*

The values promoted in advisory should be expressed throughout the school. Advisory can be a culture-shaping platform for students' experience of the school. It is not, however, a cure-all. If the rest of the school day leaves students feeling isolated, anonymous, and defeated, those feelings can overwhelm short, periodic attempts to build community and grit.



coordinating team is assessing what is and isn't working in materials, scheduling, grouping, and other design aspects. Or it might change because a new challenge or opportunity arises, or because advisors in their third year are ready for topics and formats that would've been too big a stretch in their first year.

Frequent assessment demonstrates a resilient expectation for growth, problem solving, and improvement. Assessment through surveys, focus groups, walk-throughs, and other feedback is crucial to promote learning and effective change. In the absence of learning, the stress from change corrodes the effectiveness of school structures, wears down faculty, and harms students (Siegel, 1999).

### **Fostering Adult and Organizational Resilience**

Our discussions with educators from both affluent and high-poverty areas reveal different challenges to adult resilience—in ways that parallel the challenges of many students from these two types of communities. An advisor in a wealthy suburban school said, "We're accustomed to being excellent at everything we do. This new advisor role is really stressful." After observing the new advisory groups, the assistant principal in this school reflected, "I love working with teachers who hold themselves to high standards. But I keep hearing that teachers are holding themselves to an unreasonable and unspoken standard that's about being excellent, every time, including the first time through." Such immediate success isn't likely, and expecting it is counterproductive to resilience.

To link advisory and its values to the school as a whole, consider the following questions:

- How do you connect advisory with guidance counseling? With schoolwide student voice and leadership?
- What are the depth and tone of your orientation programs for new students and of your induction efforts for new teachers?
- Do your school spirit events foster a positive spirit or rivalries that can lead to hazing?
- Do your discipline and academic practices represent a growth mind-set?

### *Assessment and Feedback*

As the saying goes, change is inevitable; learning is optional. Every advisory program will change over time. It will change because the

We often hear from educators in high-poverty schools that it's difficult to feel optimistic, empowered, and resilient. They feel overwhelmed with the learning challenges and traumas in students' lives. Some are reminded of traumas in their own pasts; the experiences they have in common with their students drew them to teach in high-poverty schools, but the work often repeatedly triggers difficult memories. A principal recounted another obstacle: "My faculty should be helping students learn about and feel entitled to resources, access, and opportunities. But sometimes we sink to a mind-set of poverty."

A well-implemented advisory program can address such obstacles to adult resilience and encourage organizational resilience. Leaders should communicate that the work will involve problem solving, support for and development of advisors, and continual improvement.


A lack of institutional resilience can be striking—as when a school or district starts an initiative, doesn't follow through on continuous improvement, shifts to a replacement initiative a few years later, and replaces it again a few years after that. Schools and districts need to model long-term stamina.

### Coping with the Boston Bombing

As we wrote this article, the Boston Marathon bombings and subsequent million-person lockdown took place during school vacation. When schools reopened, we saw varied responses. Some leaders instructed teachers not to talk about the events; some let teachers decide whether and how to talk about them. Demonstrating a third type of response, principal Jeffrey Liberty of Boston Green Academy scheduled a longer advisory meeting first thing in the morning and provided advisors discussion prompts,

information on counseling resources, and a supportive conversation after school. In schools without advisory structures and rituals, we suspect some students learned that tough topics aren't discussed in school—and students are on their own. With effective advisories, students learned that they could talk about their experiences, give and receive support, and become stronger.

Sadly, teenagers' worlds often involve tragedies. If we want young people to be resilient, we need structures in place that provide students and teachers with skills and practices for dealing with tough times. The good news is that we can have—and can model for students—stamina, long-term vision, and dedication to supportive communities.

School structures present many challenges to resilience. But when a school takes time and space for advisory, it sends the message that knowing and supporting kids are at the center of its mission. 

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