The Value and Purpose of Student Advisories

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Context

Students who feel more connected to their school are more apt to be well-adjusted socially and emotionally and academically more successful. Also, students who feel as if the adults in the school know them and care about them are less likely to engage in at-risk behaviors (Klem & Connell, 2004). Students are more apt to be successful in school if school personnel create an inclusive environment for all students (Klem & Connell, 2004). For students to feel more connected to their school and to be more involved, schools have implemented advisory programs to address the needs of all students. However, for an advisory to effectively improve a school's climate, student cultural competency, and student connectedness, the advisory must be implemented with fidelity by staff members.

Student Advisories

Advisory is a time scheduled during the school day specifically to provide students the opportunity to foster a positive relationship with an adult and peers in the school (Cushman, 1990). For schools to successfully implement advisories, Railsback (2004) provides three guidelines for schools and districts to follow. The first is that the organization of the advisory must be sensible for the school environment (Railsback, 2004). Advisories can be implemented with a variety of themes and variations. However, not all of these are necessarily right for a particular school. The school must choose carefully the needs the advisory is going to address and base the components of the advisory from that analysis. Secondly, advisors must understand what their role is and what is expected of them (Railsback, 2004). The vision of the advisory and the framework for its function must be clear so that staff feel confident in the ability to follow the expected procedures. Thirdly, the advisory must have a specific goal or goals (Railsback, 2004). Having a set agenda and objectives provides all stakeholders, staff members, students, and parents, with a clear understanding of the purpose of the advisory. Unstructured time in a school rarely benefits anyone and if the expectations of the advisory are not explicit to all involved, then typically the advisory program will not serve any purpose with helping students.

Considering the positive influence a sound advisory program can have on students and a school (Railsback, 2004), the study site has implemented a student advisory called FACEtime. The purpose of FACEtime is "to further develop student and staff relationships, increase school connectedness and help foster a positive school climate. Four phases in relationship building are the basis for the FACEtime program, Foundations, Awareness, Change and Evolve" (Study site, 2014). The advisory meets weekly for forty minutes. All students, and the majority of staff, both licensed and classified, participate in FACEtime.

The study site mirrors only one other high school in the district, which has fifteen high schools, with its lack of diversity. The school is 87% Caucasian with Hispanic, African-American, and Asian students making up the remaining 13% of the student body. Seven-percent of the students receive free or reduced lunch. Most recently, this school administered nine tests to ELL students for a state writing assessment. Another school in the district administered over 450 such tests. One of the stated beliefs of the school's mission statement is "We believe that we must be responsible for achieving our goals, for contributing to society, and for being effective global citizens of the world around us" (Study site, 2014). In addition, the school's core belief aligns with the district's core belief of "an inclusive, safe, caring, and challenging learning environment serves as the foundation for student growth" (Study county, 2014). The school does not have a diverse student population. Therefore, the student-staff advisory addresses and

teaches cultural competency, global awareness, and with the goal of improving school climate and student-school connectedness for all students

The school has had issues regarding students using racial slurs and attempting to disrupt the school by walking through the halls with a Confederate flag to instigate reactions from other students. In addition, situations involving Muslim students have occurred in which other students have harassed and called the Muslim students inappropriate names. However, before advancing with the advisory implementation, an Equity team was formed for the purpose of moving the school community forward with regards to cultural competency and student connectedness. For this school's purpose, the Equity team, consisting of staff members, parents, and students, meets to ensure all students receive the necessary resources to be academically successful and socially and emotionally supported. The school's staff, many of whom are veteran staff members and white, needed to be trained on cultural competency as well. During the school's fourth year of operation, the school hired a consultant who worked with the school on professional development to help teachers identify potential biases and how to teach and connect positively with students from diverse cultures (Howard, 2002). In addition, staff received training on how to incorporate different cultural perspectives into their lessons. The staff was informed that the student advisory would begin with the goal of improving the school climate, cultural competency, and student connectedness; however, the advisory would not start until the school's fifth year of operation. The focus for the fourth year was on the staff and building their capacity to create meaningful relationships with each other and their students.

The school implemented the student-staff advisory at the beginning of the second quarter of the 2014-2015 school year. The advisory began with 123 mixed grade level groups with a school staff member, licensed and classified included, as an advisory leader (Study site, 2014). Each group had twelve to fourteen students. The school's Equity team created lessons based on cultural competency and data gathered from school climate surveys and discipline statistics. The advisory has now completed its second year of implementation. The school must survey all stakeholders and begin assessing whether the advisory is serving its purpose of improving school climate and student connectedness to the school. However, the school must also find out whether the advisory is being implemented in each group in the manner it was designated to do.

Student Relationships and Connectedness to Schools

Student advisories are not new to the educational setting and their effect on the school environment can vary (Cushman, 1990). Much research has been completed on advisories indicating they can be a purposeful tool for increasing student connectedness with the school. In addition, The Centers for Disease Control identify six strategies for helping students feel more connected to their school environment. These strategies include:

- Create decision-making processes that facilitate student, family, and community engagement; academic achievement; and staff empowerment,

- Provide education and opportunities to enable families to be actively involved in their children's academic and school life,

- Provide students with the academic, emotional, and social skills necessary to be actively engaged in school,

- Use effective classroom management and teaching methods to foster a positive learning environment,

- Provide professional development and support for teachers and other school staff to enable them to meet the diverse cognitive, emotional, and social needs of children and adolescents,

- Create trusting and caring relationships that promote open communication among

administrators, teachers, staff, student, families, and communities (Centers, 2009).

A review of the literature for student advisories indicates students do feel more connected with the school when they have positive and respectful relationships with their teachers (Blum, 2005). Cushman (1990) found that effective advisories helped students feel as if they mattered. In addition, the structure of advisories can be very different with each variation having the potential to provide positive results (Cushman, 1990). However, advisories that do not meet frequently enough, once every two weeks or less, do not provide the necessary time for students and teachers to foster meaningful relationships (Chaffee, Landa, & Marchesi, 2012). Research also indicates that schools that avoid tracking their students into either college or vocational tracks help students have greater connectivity with those schools (Blum, 2005). Literature reinforces that it is not the class size that matters most with students' connectedness, but rather the effectiveness of the teacher (Stronge, 2010). In addition, Blum (2005) states, teachers and schools can connect with their students by:

- Avoiding separating students onto vocational and college tracks,

- Setting high academic standards for all students and providing all students with the same core curriculum,

- Ensuring that every student has an advisor,

- Providing mentorship programs,

- Ensuring that course content is relevant to the lives of students,

- Providing experiential, hands-on learning opportunities,

- Using a wide variety of instructional methods and technologies (Blum, 2005).

Implementing Change

Implementing a student advisory can be a significant change for a school since it involves most stakeholders and a significant amount of time. In recent years, a substantial amount of literature and research exist regarding implementing change in schools. Leading change is difficult and must be done with effective planning and a clear vision (Kotter, 2015; Holcomb, 2009). Effective leadership comes not from a title, but rather the person's ability to mobilize people and inspire them to achieve goals established by the organization (Fullan, 2001; Northouse, 2016). To lead, a person must garner the respect and trust of others. Followers must believe that the person they are following is leading them in a direction that will be beneficial for themselves and the organization. In addition, the leader must establish the reason for the change. To change solely for the purpose of changing will not galvanize the staff to support change. There must be a reason and a sense of urgency that unless the change occurs, then the current situation will not improve, or even worse, will deteriorate (Kotter, 2015; Corbett, 2013). In addition, it is imperative for a group of influential stakeholders to be involved in the decision-making processes for the change (Kotter, 2015; Cooper, Brondyk & Macaluso, 2015). Research indicates that the leader must be able to assess the current status of the organization and be able to convey and articulate a vision that teachers believe meaningful (Holcomb, 2009). Having a clear strategic plan for any successful organization is a non-negotiable (Ewy, 2009).

Kotter (2015) identifies eight change processes that must take place for successful change to be implemented. Kotter's (2015) processes include:

- Create – Sense of Urgency

- Build – Guiding Coalition

- Form – Strategic Visions & Initiatives

- Enlist – Volunteer Army

- Enable – Action by Removing Barriers

- Generate – Short-term Wins

- Sustain – Acceleration

- Institute – Change

As indicated, the implementation of the student advisory was a change for the study site. Before the school implemented advisory, the school spent a year, led by an Equity team made up of administrators, teachers, and an outside consultant, to lead and prepare the school for the change. Data regarding discipline statistics and attendance rates were shared with staff to create the sense of urgency. In 2012, the study site had an attendance rate higher than only one other high school in the district and a suspension rate for drugs, alcohol, and tobacco that was elevated vis-à-vis other district high schools as well. The Equity team served as the guiding coalition for the school. By reviewing data and research on advisories, both by site visits and through research publications, the team was able to establish the vision and the initiatives for the advisory. The Equity team then worked with other stakeholders in the school and asked them to review the plans and help provide additional input. The team, in order to remove any potential barriers, brainstormed possible consequences and unintended consequences for the change to advisory. They found solutions or explanations for each issue brought forth. Once the school put into practice the advisory, the Equity team asked staff and students to share their personal reflections and experiences to highlight successes of the program. After two years of implementation, the school expects to continue enhancing the program while also ensuring it becomes intertwined within the organizational construct of the school. However, concerns continue to exist with some aspects of the advisory and the school must also assess whether the program is being implemented according to expectations.

Fidelity of Implementation

The importance of fidelity of implementation is paramount to the success of any program, initiative or change (Fidelity, 2006). For change to be successful, the teachers have to understand the vision of the change and believe that the change is purposeful for the betterment of the organization or school (Kotter, 2015). Regarding advisories, literature on advisories indicates that teachers must be trained to be effective advisors. Providing professional development for teachers is a key component for the success of the advisory. Simply implementing a program without effective professional development will produce disappointing results and the goals of the program will not be met (Davidson, 2004). In addition, providing teachers with clear lessons and goals is vital to the program (Chaffee, Landa, & Marchesi, 2012). Time must be dedicated to training staff on working with students and preparing to be advisors (Davidson, 2002; Tolley, 2012). Some staff members are more comfortable teaching their content than taking on the role as an advisory leader for a group of students. In order for staff members to feel more secure in this role, they must be equipped with the necessary strategies to successfully engage and embrace this new responsibility.

In order for the goals of a school to be reached, all stakeholders need to implement at a level which will lead to the success of the program and their students. If some stakeholders do not implement appropriately, whether through disagreement with the objective of the program, apathy, or some other reason, their actions can have a significant impact on the success of the program and the students with whom they work. Ensuring fidelity of implementation can be problematic (Fidelity, 2006). Given that this school's advisory has 123 advisory groups ensuring that all 123 staff advisors are implementing the advisory effectively can be difficult. To monitor fidelity of implementation, there are three components, method, frequency, and support systems, which enable an organization to effectively monitor implementation (Fidelity, 2006). The first component, method, includes direct and indirect assessments. A direct assessment would include a personal observation of the staff member with his or her advisory group. An indirect assessment could include interviews, surveys or rating scales completed by students or the teacher (Fidelity, 2006). The second component, frequency, indicates how often the direct or indirect assessments occur. It is important that staff be observed and know how often the observations happen. In addition,

avoiding a punitive association with the observations is important for staff support (Fidelity, 2006). Lastly, the support system component identifies areas that need improvement and provides resources for those teachers or advisories that need additional support.

The Problems with Advisory

Not all educators or researchers believe the implementation of advisories help students feel more connected to a school. Even though there exists substantial and credible research indicating that advisories, when implemented with fidelity, do wield positive academic, social, and emotional results for students and the school community, on the whole, there also exists research that indicates that advisories do not have the significant effect that educators believe. As Shulkind and Foote (2009) point out, there is limited empirical information indicating that advisories are effective. Also, because there are so many different variations of what a student advisory can be, identifying best practices for advisory is difficult. Identifying what makes a specific or particular component of an advisory more successful than another is challenging to isolate and identify as well (Shulkind & Foote, 2009). However, one criterion that has been identified as bearing poor results is when the advisory does not meet often (Railsback, 2004). Schools that implement a student advisory for the sake of having one, without committing the time necessary for students, their peers, and the adults to foster meaningful relationships, will not achieve the expected results of the advisory (Chaffee, Landa, & Marchesi, 2012).

Although some researchers may indicate the difficulty in establishing a correlation with student advisories and student connectedness to schools, there does exist mounting research and evidence demonstrating that advisories do indeed have a positive effect on students' connectedness to school and their social, emotional and academic growth.

In a study conducted by Klem and Connell (2004), schools that created a more personalized environment, i.e. a high level of teacher support for students, gave evidence of increased student engagement in the school, higher attendance, and test scores. Both teachers and students indicated that increased teacher support for students had a positive effect on student outcomes (Klem & Connell, 2004). The study pointed out that variables such as attendance and test scores were analyzed due to their positive association of likely post-secondary educational success and economic self-sufficiency and stability (Klem & Connell, 2004). In addition, the researchers found that students who identified schools in which they perceived lower teacher support also performed at lower levels when compared to students reporting higher teacher support. Advisories, when implemented appropriately, help students; however, the opposite may have just as powerful of an effect on students. If teachers are not highly involved as social, emotional and academic supports for their students, the effect on student success can be detrimental. (Klem & Connell, 2004).

In a study on absenteeism of 70 middle school students, those students who were assigned to an advisory program demonstrated a significant decrease in absences (Simpson & Boriak, 1994, as cited by Railsback, 2004). Also, Railsback (2004) found in her research that schools which foster a caring, and trusting environment have high rates of student achievement, attendance, and lower suspension rates. In addition, those schools in which students identify with at least one adult with whom they have a trusting and caring relationship demonstrate greater success with achievement, attendance and suspensions as well (Railsback, 2004).

Many schools' and school districts' missions and goals are to prepare their students to become purposeful citizens in society. As research continues to accumulate regarding the lasting benefits of a well-planned and implemented advisory, schools should continue to seek to implement programs, such as advisory, that demonstrate a significant influence on student success.

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