
Making Space for Mini-Conferences

The Goal of Mini-Conferences in Advisory

One key reason for implementing a school-wide advisory program is to provide time and space for mini-conferencing between advisors and individual advisees on a regular basis. Advisees can benefit from individualized conversations with an adult in the building who may or may not be their teacher and who has a good sense of the whole student—their academic program, strengths, areas for growth, personal interests, and home life. These short one-to-one conversations help advisees develop a growth mindset, self-management skills (reflecting on and improving learning habits), and interpersonal skills (self-advocacy with teachers). They also offer an opportunity to address equity issues—what some advisees might have noted earlier as “skills or moves or tricks that some kids know how to do to be successful at school” but that are a mystery to other students.

Since advisors focus on the advisee as a whole, not how they are doing in just one class, they might notice slumps sooner than specific academic teachers might notice them, hear about stress building up or complications with friends or at home, or be able to help advisees connect what they are learning to a passion they have mentioned in advisory. Mini-conferencing also fosters a greater sense of connection between each advisee and their advisor—a key protective factor for school success and healthy development.

For more information about how to implement mini-conferences, suggested activities, and goal-setting templates, we recommend Rachel Poliner and Carol Miller Lieber’s *The Advisory Guide: Designing and Implementing Effective Advisory Programs in Secondary Schools*.

Best Practices for Mini-Conferences

- Sit next to the advisee or across a corner of a desk (a partnership position), not directly across (an opposition position).
- Introduce to the whole group a template that they will use repeatedly. Review or briefly brainstorm the kinds of responses that fit each prompt.
- Set SMART goals. If your advisees do not have experience setting SMART goals, you can provide models. For example, “Getting a better grade in math” or “Arriving to first period on time” are too vague. A more specific and time-bound version of the first goal could be “For the next three weeks, I will meet with my math teacher on Tuesdays for 30 minutes during my free period. I will write the meeting in my planner and set a reminder on my phone.”
- Prepare coaching questions to help advisees understand their own learning process. What steps have you tried? What was the impact? What else could you try? If advisees need to ask a teacher for an extension or a retest, have them role-play their request with you first. Then offer suggestions of your own.

What do other advisees do during mini-conferences?

Group projects or certain routines can be worthwhile, self-running, and able to create just enough noise to give the mini-conference some privacy. You might also invite advisees to choose (appropriate) background music if they are working on a project.

A few options to consider as one-time projects:

- During the first round of mini-conferences (see Activity 16, which can be done anytime in the opening weeks of the school year), have advisees make their advisory folders, where they will store their activity handouts, goal-setting sheets, and journals. Provide basic art supplies so that advisees can personalize these. Pocket folders work well because advisees can store journals in one side pocket and papers in the other.
- If you have space, have the advisory group make an advisory mural that represents them to be hung in the room or outside in the hall.

A few options to consider as ongoing routines:

- Choose a couple of prompts (better yet, have advisees create a routine for choosing the prompts) for discussion in trios, with a fun template for writing or drawing their responses.
- Gather and use puzzles and brainteasers from online, print, and game sources. Advisees can manage the process and get good mental exercise. Word games may be easy for some advisees but challenging for others. Advisees might have opposite reactions to Sudoku puzzles. Vary the puzzles and brainteasers so that everyone has time with exercises that stretch their normal ways of thinking. You can chat as a group and/or with individual advisees about how they manage frustration with puzzles and brainteasers and how that connects to the way they manage frustration in classes.²

² Rachel Poliner, a national leader and author for advisory programs, wrote this section.