

# Teacher Advisor

Amid all of the recent flurry of provincial, national and international reports calling for educational reform initiatives to raise academic standards, add course requirements, require competency testing, and otherwise upgrade the quality of our schools, very little attention has been given to the need for improved student support, guidance and counseling services. Yet effective learning can take place only within a supportive environment, of which developmental guidance is a crucial component.

When students have problems, they turn to those whom they know the best, and who they think can help the most. Surveys have shown that the adults to whom students of all ages are most likely to turn, after their parents, are teachers. A teacher advisor program (TAP) is therefore one very effective way of directly involving teachers in developmental guidance.

The Teacher Advisor Program (TAP) is an innovative developmental approach to counseling that directly involves teachers as advisors to 18 to 20 students, with whom they meet both individually and in group sessions on a regular basis.

The staff of Wm. E. Hay Composite High School is committed to a Teacher Advisor System as one of the foundations of the philosophy of this school and one of the foundations of our Flexibility Enhancement Project.

Our primary goal as advisors is to provide each student at Wm. E. Hay a small group in which to explore topics relevant to success not only in high school but also after high school. Our students are grouped alphabetically and advisors are randomly assigned to each group. We try to assign twenty or fewer students to each group. Students remain with the same group of students and advisor throughout their high school careers.

Each student is a member of a group consisting of approximately 18-20 students from all grade levels. The Teacher Advisor's role is one of mentor and advocate for the student. In addition, the Teacher Advisor is responsible for monitoring the student's progress in all subject areas, for assisting the students in their daily organization, and helping them set realistic goals leading to the completion of course work and the attainment of their high school diploma.

Parental involvement is an important aspect of student achievement. Parents will be encouraged to maintain frequent contact with their student's Advisor in a partnership which has as its major focus the progress and well being of each individual student.

The Teacher Advisor Program at Wm. E. Hay has been and is a successful program. Our students can all benefit from the skills taught during these TA classes. This program does take time and energy, but the benefits to our students are enough to make it worthwhile.

## **Are Teachers Qualified To Give Advice?**

Although classroom teachers may lack the professional training of counselors, school teachers have a long tradition of helping students with personal problems. They also interact with the students daily, and thus are in an excellent position to provide personal direction. In fact, effective teachers share many of the same traits as effective counselors: ability to empathize with students, patience and flexibility, excellent interpersonal skills, openness to new ideas, and awareness of individual differences. Good teachers also habitually promote and sustain positive group interaction in their classes, and develop a helping relationship with both students and parents. In all these ways, the teacher's role is closely allied to that of the counselor.

## **What Is The Role Of Student Services in The TAP?**

Although some teachers, counselors, social workers, FSWW's and student services personnel alike fear that TAP is simply a strategy for getting teachers to take over counselors' work, it is important to emphasize that Teacher Advisors can never be a substitute for professional school counselors, social workers, FSWW's or student services personnel. Rather, in a well-designed Teacher Advisor Program, the respective roles of teachers and other school or social agencies must be clearly identified. An understanding needs to be reached, for example, that teachers will refer students with special needs to our FSWW or student services department, instead of attempting to handle students' complex emotional or behavioral problems on their own.

Teachers can also collaborate with student services personnel and our FSWW by inviting them to address their classes on special topics; such visits will create a visible bond between teachers and other departments in our school, and thus dissuade students from

attempting to play one off against the other. Furthermore, student services personnel and our FSWW can assist teachers who are having trouble managing their groups by modeling group guidance skills and serving as consultants to the teachers. In fact, student services personnel/counselors often assume leadership roles in TAP, coordinating and helping the teachers along the way and providing resources for them.

### **Will Teachers Support TAP?**

In spite of the advantages of a Teacher Advisor Program, many teachers are reluctant to support such a program, because they are either skeptical about its utility or wary of the extra preparation that such a program would involve. Robert D. Myrick estimates, for example, that in most schools 20% of the teachers would immediately support such a program while 20% would be strongly opposed. It is therefore important to move the middle 60% toward supporting our TAP developmental guidance and building relationships with our students.

If most of our teachers are to support a Teacher Advisor Program, they must clearly understand and embrace the essential concepts of developmental guidance underlying the program and the curricular goals. They also need preparation in guidance and interpersonal skills, so that they can effectively facilitate class discussions that help students think about personal problems and explore alternative courses of action.

Second, if a TAP is to be anything more than a formality, the time commitment needs to be adequate. Group meetings of once a week or less are not likely to allow valuable helping relationships between teachers and their advisees to develop, nor do they give teachers the opportunity to establish continuity or consistency when attempting to build relationships with students. TAP works best when it is scheduled every school day, or at least two or three times a week; otherwise, teachers tend to view TAP as an added encumbrance, peripheral to their major duties.

Besides an adequate allotment of time, TAP also must have a developmental guidance curriculum with clearly articulated objectives, and with supporting materials and activities that can stimulate student participation. If teachers have an organized Teacher Advisor or guidance handbook, which they are at liberty to follow, adapt, or modify as they see fit, they are more likely to "buy into" the guidance portion of our TA program as a whole.

Finally, teachers need to be assured of full support and cooperation from both the administration and the student services staff, so that they won't feel as if the burden of student guidance has been unfairly shifted to their shoulders. For this reason, TAP will be monitored and evaluated by students, teachers, counselors, and administrators every year to ensure that the program is meeting its goals.

- Ratio of 560 students to 1 Full Time Student Services / Counselor (too high for effective, one-on-one guidance)
- Allows for more personal relationships, more career/college planning, more involvement in student's life

### **Curriculum Ideas**

- 9<sup>th</sup> grade—transition, study skills, test taking, time management,
- 10<sup>th</sup> grade—job applications, career paths, test-taking, time management
- 11<sup>th</sup> grade—job interviews, career paths, college applications, resume writing
- 12<sup>th</sup> grade—college presentations, personal finance

### **Suggestions For Effective Advising**

- Decrease the student-teacher ratio any way you can. Small advising groups are important.
- Learn about families, their struggles, challenges, attitudes, and passions; doing so helps you to know more about from where students come.
- Advocate for each student and teach students how to advocate for themselves.
- Make each student feel important by valuing his or her uniqueness.

- Encourage students to ask for help.
- Help each student set goals.
- Allow individuals to take responsibility for their own learning.
- Develop support groups for kids who have experienced divorce, death, or trauma.
- Encourage self expression, self-reflection, and self-evaluation.
- Develop an advisory system that can focus on each individual student's personal needs, and then encourage personal relationships with those advisors.
- Honor students when they constructively disagree by promoting/ modeling dialogue and being open to change.
- Demonstrate the "power of one" by providing examples of individuals that have made a difference, and empower individuals to do the same in your classes through their own actions.
- Provide a way to uncover a passion.
- Expect self-direction and encourage it.
- Celebrate strengths; don't dwell on weaknesses.
- Focus on the individual to take responsibility for his or her actions.
- Model personal strengths and struggles.

### **What Are "Mandatory" Blocks and What Are "Flex" Blocks?**

Student timetables are individualized and it is very unlikely that any two student's timetables will look exactly alike. However, all student timetables have both "mandatory blocks" and "flex blocks".

All subject areas require mandatory contact classes with students 3-6 times per week. For example, English classes are mandatory and required for all grade 10 students registered in English. This means that English 10 students are required to report to their class every designated English block. Attendance is taken in these classes on our SIS (Maplewood). It is during this time teachers may work with the class as a whole, conduct small group seminars or work with individuals. The mandatory block is really designed and in place to provide the teacher with an opportunity to stay in touch with students, deliver curriculum, monitor individual progress and evaluate and assess students.

When students are not required to be in a mandatory block, they may plan to use the open blocks of time in a "flexible" manner i.e. they will with the assistance of their Teacher Advisor set up additional blocks of time in their timetable (2 times per week), to get additional help in subject areas where they may be lacking.

It will not be uncommon to find that during "Flex Blocks", students from all grades moving throughout our building accessing various instructors in different parts of our building. You may also see students working on English or Social Studies in the same room with a teacher or teachers circulating to help individuals or small groups of students who need assistance.

### **Flex Time**

#### **Flex Time (Academic Networking – AN)**

- Designed to give students opportunity to seek extra help, make up tests and homework, work on group projects, tutor or mentor other students
- Students allowed to travel during designated times (Tuesdays and Thursdays) to other classrooms or project areas
- Entire block devoted to Flex Time (AN) every Tuesday and Thursday for 33 minutes

#### **Students alphabetically placed by grade level with the same teacher until graduation**

- This teacher is responsible for verifying travel locations and times, distributing report cards and discussing academic progress to some degree
- Flex Time (AN) will be available to facilitate Teacher Advisor Program