

Transformation and Discovery in Middle School

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The influence of a single adult reaching a youngster at the right moment cannot be underestimated.

—Patricia Hersch, *A Tribe Apart*

Effective middle schools are not characterized merely by high achievement, but also by their cohesive and warm atmosphere. Such is the case at Rosa International Middle School in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

Beyond the tangible measurements of high academic achievement, strong cocurricular involvement, and minimum disciplinary action are the intangible qualities that result from an advisory program that ensures Rosa students are known, involved, and cared for.

Rosa opened its doors in 1999 to relieve overcrowding at two other middle schools. A magnet school with no pre-requisite or geographic requirement to accept students from specific neighborhoods, Rosa became a catalyst for change. The faculty's enthusiasm, combined with Rosa's philosophies, provided an opportunity for the staff and students to develop a program worthy of national recognition.

A COMMUNITY OF CARING

Caring is a central part of Rosa's philosophy, where the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (MYP) provides a framework of academic challenge and life skills for students ages 11-16 and offers an educational approach that embraces yet transcends traditional school subjects.

The MYP is based on the premise that education can foster understanding among young people around the world. Thus, creating an atmosphere of caring and understanding is a central focus at Rosa.

Rosa's advisory program, Transformation and Discovery, focuses on ensuring developmental responsiveness by providing an adult advocate for every student, building personal relationships outside academic rigor, providing a safe place to confide and interact with a positive role model, offering a sense of belonging to a "home place," and connecting students with a network of caring peers.

Rosa's advisory program promotes positive school experiences through goal setting, academic enrichment, character education, and life skill guidance. A strong bond is built among peers, students, and adults. In turn, the powerful connection builds self-esteem, self-reliance, and independent life-long learners.



A DAILY DOSE

A 40-minute advisory scheduled first thing in the morning provides the students with a positive beginning to every school day. Advisories are scheduled by grade level, with each advisory consisting of 12-15 heterogeneously grouped students per adult. The low student-adult ratio is possible because administrators, guidance counselors, and the school nurse all serve as advisors as well.

Advisory teachers teach four classes in their subject area; the fifth class is their advisory period. Teachers are not required to serve a lunch or hall duty so they have time for personal preparation as well as collaborative planning. A shorter half-hour lunch period allows for more daily planning time.

Daily business such as taking attendance, distributing flyers, and providing for field trips are simplified with these small groups of students. Schoolwide flexible scheduling allows students to meet in advisory groups whenever teachers deem it necessary, for example for goal setting or individual conferences prior to distribution of interims or report cards.

A variety of peer connections develop naturally with a small “family” concept. Advisory curriculum is based on student needs and can be adapted to what is happening in the students’ world each and every day.

Authentic life experiences may drive a discussion or activities, guide adolescent decision making, and broaden perspectives of the “outside world.” In the comfort of a “family” setting, students share and gain insight.

Small group advisory has proven itself effective time and time again as it addressed such potentially overwhelming issues as the September 11 tragedy, local teen suicides, fatal student accidents, and life threatening diseases. Even minor difficulties such as a chronic bus problem can be addressed in the morning advisory instead of waiting until they “snowball” out of control or reappear later in the day as bigger issues.

Advisors serve as a relay between the faculty team and the parents. When parents have questions or concerns, the advisors are the ones parents contact instead of individual subject teachers. Advisory fosters a culture categorized by warmth, concern, openness, and understanding. Teachers find themselves involved in students’ lives, receiving birthday invitations, attending religious functions, and participating in school activities.



SUPPORTING THE COMMUNITY

Working side by side within the community gives students yet another chance to get to know people beyond their chosen group of friends, therefore broadening their perspectives of self, peers, and relationships.

Rosa recently won the New Jersey State Service Learning award for the quality service that Rosa students provide to the community. This service-learning component is a vital component of the advisory program.

Schoolwide activities such as food drives or holiday gift collection offer students opportunities to become involved with and support their community. Individual advisories also select service-learning projects, such as adopting a nursing home, helping teachers, or working to save the environment.

ADVOCACY BEYOND ADVISORY

Many cornerstones of Rosa's programs reflect a philosophy of caring: full inclusion learning communities, MYP, and best middle school practices. Advisory is not something that happens only in class; adult advocacy occurs throughout a students' Rosa career. Although students change advisors from year to year, a previous advisor still maintains a deeper relationship with former advisees. Wider networks of adults know a larger variety of students on a personal level.

Rosa learning communities are created by four disciplines: Language A, Language B, Humanities, and Science. A resource support teacher complements the team of teachers by providing special education services for the classified population while simultaneously supporting the regular education students.

Students acknowledge the resource support teacher as an integral member of the learning community. Along with IEP issues, support can span from academic concerns to teenage "drama." Resource support teachers are more adults with whom advisees can establish a positive relationship.

In keeping with the MYP program, which stresses the importance of self with holistic education, communication, and intercultural awareness, Rosa's curriculum is interdisciplinary and revolves around students' view of the world as it relates to themselves.

Rosa's climate of comfort and tolerance can be noted in the low disciplinary incidents reported in the 2001-2002 school year. Only 20 Rosa students were suspended in 2001-2002, as opposed to sister middle schools in the district that received 80 and 120 suspensions respectively.

We can also conclude that the advisory program has an effect on academics. Rosa's Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA) scores are as much as 11% higher than state averages in some categories.



Rosa's philosophy and curriculum based on the best middle school practices provide the mortar of its foundation. An adult advocate for every student, flexible scheduling, and collaborative daily planning are necessary for the effective development of today's middle school student. A school enriched by advocacy creates the environment for student success.

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