

Interview with Luz Padua, Acting Director, Fenway High School

Q: Why don't you tell me a little about the role of advisories at Fenway?

A: Advisories meet 3 times a week for 1 hour. (We have block scheduling.) Ninth grade advisories focus on the transition into Fenway life – emotional, social, academic, and behavioral. They work on health and wellness issues a lot in 9th grade as well. Also, time management and presentation skills. Tenth grade advisories focus on community service. Eleventh grade advisories focus on their junior review. Junior review is a reflective and evaluative portfolio about their experience at Fenway over the last 2 years. They present their work publicly in content areas and in an exemplary area that they have done high quality work in. They present to a committee made up of teachers, peers, council members, and community members. They also do career research and practice college application essays at this stage, too.

Unlike most traditional schools, twelfth grade is the most intense year at Fenway. Students must graduate with a portfolio and present it publicly. Graduate portfolios focus on life after Fenway, along with their academic achievements over the last four years.

We have divided up the school into three Houses so it is like three schools within a school. Each house has the same curriculum but a different staff. Students who stay in the same house will carry the same advisors from 2 to 4 years, depending on their choices.

Q: What elements of advisories do you think are most beneficial to students and why?

A: The opportunities to make connections, to make them feel that this is really a place of belonging with their advisor and their peers.

Q: How does your school introduce advisories?

A: Fenway has been around for 20 years and the philosophies have stayed the same but the program has changed. Advisory is challenging for teachers, and we are still developing our model. Some teachers feel strong and comfortable with their advisories and some don't. The comfort level with the role of advisor is a key component in their success.

The advisors must see that the students are their biggest resource. They will let advisors know what is working and they can give great feedback. The staff needs to have planning time built in for advisories and also a time for staff to meet and share practices surrounding advisories.

Q: Can you give me an example of what an exemplary advisory meeting might look like?

A: A great advisory runs itself. The students take ownership; the parents feel connected; there is trust and a familial feeling; a bond is established.

Q: How does school size impact the educational program at the school?

A: Tremendously! It is difficult to build relationships with 30-35 students in an advisory. It is still tough with a group of 20, but manageable.

Q: What practices do you use in your advisories to be culturally responsive?

A: We have professional development on diversity issues, but what is most natural is to have consistent dialogues and discussions with staff and students. We used to bring in outside experts to help us with the ongoing process but now we are doing more internal work. We have great resources within the community. We have a diversity committee, which keeps the issues at the forefront. We have also developed a common language surrounding our diversity dialogue. The language may seem like common sense, but it has helped us a lot. We have 5 safety guidelines which are: 1) try it on (put yourself in a place to try), 2) agree to disagree, 3) take personal responsibility for your actions, 4) use confidentiality, 5) no shaming, blaming, or attacking.

Q: What recommendations do you have for educators who want to introduce advisories into their existing program?

A: Don't feel pressured to be a know-it-all; work on relationship-building; direct and guide students; don't be afraid to ask. Don't forget that advisory is still a class to prepare for; winging it will only work so many times, and will not be productive. Talk to your colleagues. Having focused goals helps to set parameters and answer the question—what is the end result? Make sure to have a time for staff to meet, plan, and discuss; this is a necessity. And have patience—advisories are not going to take off overnight, but they will take off.

