

Interview with Teri Schrader, Principal, Parker Charter Essential School

A six-year public secondary school of choice, the Parker Charter Essential School is one of Massachusetts' first charter schools. Parker was started in 1995 by area parents and teachers committed to the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools, of which it is a fully approved member.

The school was named after Francis W. Parker, the 19th-century New England educator who is known as the father of American progressive education. Theodore R. Sizer and Nancy Sizer are trustees of the school and participate actively in its ongoing development and work; they served as co-principals in 1998–99.

Q: Can you tell me a little about your school?

TS (Teri Schrader): Sure. We have 350 students here in grades 7-12 and the school is in its 8th year. Three hundred and fifty was always the size that the founders had in mind and so we started with a smaller number and increased incrementally to 350 over the years; it was very deliberate. The school is kind of in no-person's land. It is 35 miles west of Boston so it is too far away to be considered metro west. We are an independent public charter and our charter is with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. We are actually located on a decommissioned army base on the intersection of four towns. Devins is technically where we are, but Devins is no longer a town. As you can imagine, we have an intricate system of parents working to carpool kids to school, to meetings, and to one another's houses. Our parents are great about this.

Q: Why don't you tell me about the advisory program?

TS: We have thirty-three advisories and 10-12 students in each advisory. Parker's advisory program has four central purposes:

- First, to connect kids in a meaningful way with service, which looks different according to what division they are in [there are three divisions of 7-8, 9-10, 11-12 grades] because the divisions are doing activities that are developmentally appropriate. One division might decide they want to visit an animal shelter, while another may take that a step further and have a pet food drive. Another might raise awareness in the school community about animal cruelty and neglect. All advisories have a plan for community service that is filed with our advisory coordinator, Debbie Osofsky, and then followed up on as the year progresses.
- The second purpose of advisory is academic counseling. We do not outsource to specialists. We keep an eye on student issues, questions, and concerns; we facilitate conversations; we act as mediators; we are the parents go-to person; we have stewardship over the program; we are the keepers and developers of the student's personal learning plan. Parker advisors report to families six times a year about the personal learning plan goals of students.
- The third purpose of advisory is to develop and promote school citizenship - to create a democratic school community. We want students at Parker to have a civic sense and be informed about their world, and their community.
- The fourth function is fun - to play together, and to find ways that make sense for students to solve conflicts. We want to help the school be a safe place for kids to learn, whatever that means for them. Safe to interact, safe to make mistakes, safe to take risks.

Q: How did Parker introduce advisories to teachers?

TS: The program has been a part of the school since day one, but the quality and meaning of it has really been internalized in the last four years. There is a summer program where new teachers are really taught by other teachers about what advisories do and the pedagogy driving them.

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

TS: To give you a picture, our advisories happen during the first and last fifteen minutes of each day and then for half of the day on Wednesdays. The first fifteen is a check in - connections, business. The end of day fifteen is to reflect on the day, clean up their area, argue about whose turn it is to sweep, and to get information about the day to come. An example of a Wednesday advisory is this: a few weeks ago we had a fabulous storyteller speak to the kids, and then we went to advisories to debrief and talk about it. The wellness teachers developed a guide based on the storyteller's focus of alcoholism and the guide was given to advisors. Another example is students might gather on a Wednesday and go out for community service and do their pre-arranged service. The ongoing nature of advisory always includes debriefing. Sometimes advisory might look like planning for a dance. Sometimes it looks like individual conferences. It really depends on what the advisory has decided. There are so many great things that they are doing.

Q: How does school size influence the advisory program?

TS: Advisories are about more than the ratio of students to teachers. Supporting the advisors is just as important and I'm not sure we could effectively talk to each other about issues if we had a larger group. Each advisory knows all of the other advisories. With one recent problem we were having as a whole school, the advisors met and did a role-play on the issue, then discussed intervention by making a continuum for what the intervention would look like and where we were as a staff on the issue, and then we did a writing exercise to debrief and reflect. We couldn't do that with forty teachers. Advisories virtually provide not only a metaphor, but a structure for the school. Because of the small size, there is not any anonymity here so any trouble that a student runs into, we can usually break down the barriers and work it out. There are very few cracks to fall through here.

Q: Do you have any advice for schools doing the work of creating advisory programs?

TS: Do not make any assumptions. Saying it does not make it so. Everyone is carrying around a model advisory in their head – now tease out a plan from that model. Adults need to come to a meeting of minds and realize that they are not doing it alone. Decide beforehand, how does each activity we are considering help us? Build it together. Get a sense of what it is.

