



Students Speak Out—Milwaukee Quality Learning and Teaching Work Group

Proposal to include productive “advisory periods” in all Milwaukee Public Schools.

**Not a waste of time, advisory periods have an important role
in quality teaching and learning**

Revised April 16, 2009

We, the students, decided we want to work to influence and improve Quality Learning in Milwaukee Public Schools by advocating district-wide implementation of a clearly-defined advisory or ‘stillpoint’ program. Visit our Work Group at Milwaukee.StudentsSpeakOut.org (click “groups” in the navigation) to find written discussions and videos about this topic.

Working on SSO, we’ve established the following core beliefs about Quality Learning in Milwaukee Public Schools:

1. Authentic relationships with other students and adults are positively related to the level of student engagement, motivation, and achievement.
2. Students are less motivated to work hard when they feel the teacher cares only about a paycheck, and not about the students.
3. Quality learning experiences can help students overcome home situations that do not value or appreciate education.

Our Recommendation:

We recommend that an advisory, or ‘stillpoint’, period be implemented into the weekly schedule for each middle and high school in Milwaukee Public Schools.

At Marshall Montessori IB High School in Milwaukee this period was known as “Stillpoint”. We like that term because it designates the point where you are still and at peace with the day you've had. Changing the name also distinguishes these new uses of advisory time from any former unproductive uses.

The value of advisory periods

Often advisory periods are seen as “pointless” and a “waste of time”. We can see how advisory time could be used in a wasteful way, but we propose that the time could also be used productively. We conducted numerous online discussions, as well as

video interviews with our peers and teachers and found that there can be real value when advisory periods are used to:

1. **Cultivate relationships/community between teachers and students.** This means both student-teacher relationships and student-student relationships. Among students, it was important to sense the teachers trust them. One teacher brought students to her personal cabin. Knowing they were trusted that much meant the teacher believed in them. "Casual" relationships are desirable, but both students and teachers noted that this varies between people and personalities.
2. **Give students input into school-level decision making.** At MMIB, this made a difference in students' feeling they had a voice, which in turn made them "comply" more with rules, etc., which they seemed to sense could be changed in the short- or long-term based on their input. One teacher also seemed to have success in his classroom by putting students in position to own/manage the classroom
3. **Stress management.** One MMIB teacher said that when the academic setting is high-pressure, the advisory time worked well as a wind-down time. Students also frequently made this point in their video interviews.
4. **Organization.** Students said that they felt more in the loop. They knew when key dates were for exams or other school-related business. They knew when the rules were changing. They knew when schedules were changing. They sought advice about graduating, transcripts, and more. In other settings, teachers seemed too busy for this.

Suggested structure for advisory periods/stillpoint:

1. Ideally, the period would be an hour long, once a week, throughout the school year.
2. Each advisory group would have no more than 20 students and would be comprised of students from each grade. Students would be assigned to a teacher in their first year at a school and would remain with that teacher, and that advisory throughout their career at the school.
3. The advisory period would be unstructured with an agenda in order to meet its goal of creating community between students and teachers. This is a confusing concept, but in practice it is straight forward. There will be a goal for the advisory time (the agenda) but there will be no mandated way in which the teacher and students must reach that goal (unstructured). For example, in the beginning of the year, the agenda (or goal) might be to get to know each other. The way in which the different advisories go about accomplishing that is up to the individual advisories. Some might elect to do formal introductions, another might choose to write short stories that are

shared at the next advisory time, one might want to do an ice breaker, like a human knot, to break through the initial discomfort with each other. The end result would always be a better understanding of the people around you, but the way in which it is achieved would depend entirely on what the students and teacher in that particular advisory are comfortable with.

4. The implementation of this advisory program would begin in the fall and be mandatory for all middle schoolers and for freshman and sophomores in high school. Advisories would be optional for juniors and seniors in the first year and optional for seniors in the third year of implementation, and then mandatory for all middle and high school grades in following years. The first year of freshman and sophomores would be a part of the same advisory/stillpoint for all 4 and 3 years (respectively) and all classes thereon out.
5. In order for the advisory period to be taken seriously, we suggest that it be treated as a course and have credits attached. We would suggest a $\frac{1}{4}$ credit per year, a full 'community building' credit by graduation.

The rationale for our platform, developed via online and in-person dialog as well as via video interviews, is as follows:

1. Students and teachers must begin to create community in schools both big and small in order to work toward quality education. Students will benefit by having a consistent advocate and resource for questions. Teachers will benefit because students will be more connected in their schools. In addition, separating teaching time and purely community building time will make each period more effective. Though there will be overlapping benefits, trying to establish and maintain relationships with students during valuable instructional time is difficult for teachers, which is why we suggest a separate advisory/stillpoint time.
2. Students are very sensitive to teachers' motivations to be in the classroom, but also realize that not knowing teachers very well can contribute positively to their impressions of them. An advisory period allows students to get to know teachers as more than a teacher, but as a person. Students believe that once they have a connection with a teacher it is more likely that they will not act out in class and be motivated to learn.
3. Authenticity is the most important quality of a teacher and student relationship. Race, gender, and age become less important when a teacher is honest and open with their students. This includes knowing, accepting, and embracing differences in culture, language, and behavior (among others). Authenticity allows students to see teachers as allies and assets, not only as the authority. Advisory time provides opportunities for students and teachers to grow into their authentic behavior.

4. Trust is key and is built and maintained through regular communication and understanding of each other. Students and teachers can build trust through regular meetings, open dialogue, and honesty. In addition, teachers can build trust by leading by example. Students expect teachers to treat them as equals, not as criminals, statistics, or failures. When relationships are not purely academically based, some teachers' motivation to learn more about students may increase.
5. Community does not have to be school-wide to affect student motivation. Students from big and small schools alike agree that individual connections with adults are more important to motivating students.
6. Students admit that they are more motivated to learn when they feel as though someone is expecting them to perform. Often that expectation doesn't come from parents, siblings, or other adults in a student's life. Creating that kind of a connection with a teacher is nearly impossible in the current school environment, which leaves a lot of students without reason to succeed educationally. An advisory period would set aside time for these relationships to form and thrive and supplement or replace that encouragement that may be lacking at home.