Feature 1: Positive Developmental Relationships

"School should not be mass production. It should be loving and close. This is what kids need; you need love to learn."

—Student at Vanguard High School[6]

What Students Need

Human brains develop in response to positive relationships, experiences, and environments, and a high-quality education starts with relationships. We see this on the most basic level when a baby learns to talk to communicate with others and to walk because they want to reach the loving arms of their caregiver. Scientists have shown that emotions and cognition are closely linked; positive relationships create the conditions that allow young people to develop their attention, focus, memory, and other neural processes essential to learning.

Relationships also allow adults to know what makes young people unique. People have wonderfully diverse neural structures, as well as backgrounds and experiences. There is no such thing as an "average" brain[7] or an average learner. Students thrive and learn when educators know who they are and how they learn best.[8]

Effective schools create structures that allow for the time and space needed to support positive developmental relationships between adults and young people, and among young people themselves. Teachers can help young people learn more effectively when they know their students well, both emotionally and intellectually. Students need support from adults and classmates they know and trust. When schools are designed to encourage such relationships, they can create a cultural context that reinforces cognitive development and allows young people to thrive. This is particularly important for adolescents, who seek strong senses of connection, belonging, and personal identity.

These kinds of relationships are difficult to develop in schools designed on the factory model, where students may see seven or eight teachers a day for 45 or 50 minutes at a time over the course of a semester, and teachers see 150 students or more every day. This structure precludes teachers from getting to know each student well, which is made even more difficult when teachers work in isolation from one another with little time to plan together or share their knowledge about what students need. Despite the fact that teachers care deeply about their students, it is not possible to care effectively for all of their needs in this structure. As a result, a recent survey of U.S. secondary school students found that less than 30% felt they were in a school that offered a caring environment.[9]

The lack of close supportive relationships may lead students—especially those who have experienced trauma or who have unmet needs—to behave in ways that trigger punishment rather than support. The environment often focuses more on enforcement of rules and control of behavior than on getting to know students well so that their needs can be understood and addressed.

A California high school student in a large factory-model school explained his experience: "This place hurts my spirit." An administrator in the same school voiced the dilemma of caring educators caught in the disjunct between students and the system: "My spirit is hurt, too, when I have to do things I don't

believe in."[10] Heavily stratified within and substantially dehumanized throughout, the factory-model school, which we inherited from the efficiency experts of so many years ago, creates a context in which many students experience schools as not caring, even adversarial, environments, where "getting through" becomes the goal when getting known is impossible. But school does not have to be like this.

Key Practices

Smaller Learning Communities

Over the past few decades, educational research has suggested that, all else being equal, small learning communities of 300–500 students—whether small schools or smaller units within large schools—tend to produce significantly better results for students, including better attendance, greater participation in extracurricular activities, stronger academic achievement, higher grades, fewer failed courses, fewer behavioral incidents, less violence and vandalism, lower dropout rates, and higher graduation rates.[11] These results are the most pronounced for students who are typically least well served by traditional schools. In study after study of successful small schools and small learning communities within large schools, students compare their school to a family rather than a factory and link their academic achievement to their caring relationships with teachers.

Yet it is important to recognize that "small" is not enough. The key is not overall school size but rather how schools create strong, developmental relationships and leverage a web of relationships to create a caring community that supports increased learning and a safety net to prevent students from falling through the cracks. Larger secondary schools have redesigned themselves into smaller learning communities to achieve similar results.

> The key is not overall school size but rather how schools create strong, developmental relationships and leverage a web of relationships to create a caring community.

"**Houses**" or "**academies**" are two common structures for creating smaller learning communities within larger secondary schools. The house system was a feature of schools in England during the 19th century, much like the houses of Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin in the Harry Potter series. In U.S. schools today, houses are essentially cohorts of students and teachers (usually 300–400 students) that form a smaller unit with its own identity and intentional community. Each house has its own lead teacher or assistant principal, its own teaching and counseling staff, and a stable group of students who work together over multiple years.

In many schools with small learning communities, students spend part of the day in their houses and part of the day outside them. For example, often world language, arts programs, or sports are outside their house so students can choose different options (although there are also academy programs that focus on world language and arts). This arrangement allows students to build stronger relationships within the cohort but also have some choice in their schedules for electives and extracurriculars that spark their interest.

Teaching teams can personalize instruction further. For example, some middle and high schools have structures through which a group of students takes English language arts, social studies, science, and math from the same team of teachers, who may sometimes follow the students to the next grade level as well. Within each team, teachers can plan interdisciplinary curricular units and work together to support students' social, emotional, and academic needs. Students can build community and take leadership within the cohort as well. English learners and students with disabilities are integrated into cohorts rather than isolated in segregated settings. The team may include a special education teacher and/or an English language development teacher, depending on students' needs. In some high schools, students have one teaching team for 9th and 10th grades and then switch to another cohort and team for 11th and 12th grades, with cohorts sometimes linked to career pathways or other themes, which students choose based on their interests.

In Practice: Teaching Teams

Vista High School, a large comprehensive high school serving more than 2,300 diverse students in a small suburban and rural community outside of San Diego, CA, has used a house system to build relationships among students and educators. The freshman class is typically broken into six houses of 100–130 students each that share a set of four teachers to cover core subjects and one special education teacher. Each house is located in a dedicated area of the Vista High School campus, and each team works to define how spaces in and around their classrooms and house could be used to meet the learning needs of students, reimagining how the grouping of students and grouping of teachers within that space and time could positively impact student learning.

At Oakland International High School (OIHS) in Oakland, CA, an interdisciplinary team of four core content-area teachers (English language arts, math, science, and history/social studies) stays with a group of 80–100 students for 2 years, with a counselor attached to the cohort. This provides students with the opportunity to interact with the same set of teachers and counselor consistently so they can make stronger bonds and connections. OIHS is a member of the Internationals Network for Public Schools—a network of high schools serving new immigrant students across the country and that supports these kinds of relationship-centered teaching designs in all of its schools.

Sources: Darling-Hammond, L., Schachner, A., & Edgerton, A. K. (with Badrinarayan, A., Cardichon, J., Cookson, P. W., Jr., Griffith, M., Klevan, S., … Wojcikiewicz, S.). (2020). *Restarting and reinventing school: Learning in the time of COVID and beyond*. Learning Policy Institute; Roc, M., Ross, P., & Hernández, L. E. (2019). *Internationals Network for Public Schools: A deeper learning approach to supporting English learners*. Learning Policy Institute.

Student-Centered Staffing Models

Creating the conditions for strong, developmental relationships means rethinking the factory-model school designs we have inherited. For the young people and the adults in a school to be well known to each other, the school usually must have a way for students to relate to a smaller group of trusted peers on a regular basis and for teachers to have fewer students to work with at a time.

Of course, many schools and districts stop right there and say, "That's impossible—we don't have the money to hire more teachers." However, schools can make great strides toward personalization without spending more—if they are willing to reorganize and place relationships at the core. This is partly because in the United States, teaching is highly departmentalized and class periods are very short, and partly because we organize schools to place too many staff in roles outside of core classroom teaching. Only about 47% of educational employees in the United States are classroom teachers,[12] as compared to more than 70% in many countries.[13] In the United States, pupil–teacher ratios average 15 students per teacher[14]—and yet, in many high schools, students still sit in classrooms with 30 or more classmates, and teachers must juggle the needs of 150 or more students each day.

This is in part because of the way teachers' time is designed and used. Specialization by subject matter courses increases the number of students teachers see. In addition, many out-of-classroom positions—ranging from school resource officers and hall monitors to behavior deans—are required for the management needs of factory-model schools. When schools are redesigned for relationships, the need for these roles declines because relationships can be used to prevent and resolve problems. A different staffing model is possible in schools organized for personalization.

Investing in Teachers. Redesigned high schools typically offer significantly reduced pupil loads for teachers (usually in the range of 80–100 students per teacher) by rethinking their use of staff and time. This allows teachers to focus more on the individual needs of their students. One way that schools reduce pupil load and class size is by allocating more of their resources to hiring teachers rather than nonteaching staff and assigning more staff to be regularly engaged in classroom teaching rather than to roles outside the classroom. Most large traditional schools have a bigger administrative staff, and they often hire people to run special programs, such as dropout prevention and compensatory education, that exist to solve problems that arise because students are not getting enough personal attention in the classroom. These programs and positions rarely solve the core problems that are a result of depersonalized instruction, and they become less necessary when students feel that they can turn to their teachers for personal as well as academic support—and when resources are redirected to the classroom so teachers have few enough students that they can spend more time on each one.

Allocating more resources to classroom instruction may mean hiring fewer administrators or other nonteaching staff and pushing in specialists to the classroom, rather than pulling them out to organize teaching. For example, many high schools now use an "inclusion" or "push-in" approach to supporting students with special education needs, so special education teachers coteach with general education teachers rather than pulling students out of the classroom. (Of course, this model requires common preparation time for the teachers to collaborate effectively and take advantage of the reduced pupil loads.)

Reducing teachers' pupil loads may also be accomplished by offering fewer electives and partnering with other organizations for some tasks that can be handled in new ways. For example, some redesigned high schools partner with community colleges in dual credit options that support many electives, including some advanced courses in world languages or other subjects that enroll fewer students. This allows teachers to carry smaller course loads overall and smaller class sizes in core courses.

Block Scheduling. Many secondary schools also reduce pupil loads for teachers by having teachers teach fewer groups of students for longer blocks of time. Some forms of block scheduling strengthen relationships by reducing course loads for both teachers and students. Many high schools use either a "4x4" block schedule, in which students take four courses in the fall semester and four in the spring semester, or an "A/B" block schedule, in which students may take courses on alternating days of the week for the full year. Each course meets for approximately 90 minutes per day rather than the typical 45 minutes. This system cuts teachers' typical pupil loads in half and allows teachers to plan lessons that include engaging elements such as group work, hands-on problem-solving, presentations, and project-based learning. Meanwhile, students can focus on fewer subjects at once and do more rigorous work in each one, with more time in class for peer collaboration and inquiry-based learning along with direct instruction. Some schools operate daily block schedule courses for the full academic year, which gives students an even more in-depth experience in each area. Research suggests that this full-year model of block scheduling is particularly important for success in math courses.[15]

Interdisciplinary Courses. Another way to personalize instruction and reduce a teacher's pupil load is to create interdisciplinary courses.[16] In a humanities course in which one teacher is responsible for both English and social studies, for example, they can have half as many students for a longer block of time (usually 70–120 minutes). Many middle schools and some high schools create interdisciplinary humanities and math/science courses that are taught in block schedules, and they further personalize learning by enabling the teaching teams to focus on a shared group of students around whom they can plan instruction and supports.

Structures for Stronger Relationships Over Time

Effective schools are not only designed to support strong relationships; they are also structured to allow these relationships to develop *over time*. Ever since the United States adopted the Prussian age-grading system in the late 1800s, the practice of handing off students to a different teacher each year has undergirded the age-old teachers' complaint about how we lose so much ground with our students with all the start-ups and wind-downs that occur each year. This phenomenon is even worse for secondary teachers, who may have a chance to get to know only a small portion of their students in a detailed way by midyear.

Looping. When students and teachers stay together for multiple years—a strategy called looping—they do not have to spend all that time reestablishing relationships and developing norms and routines, and they can devote much more time to the business of learning. Looping is common in schools in many other countries and is used in many redesigned middle and high schools. In some schools, the 9th-grade teachers stay with their students as they move up to 10th grade and shift to teaching the 10th-grade curriculum; the following year, they return to teaching 9th grade and take on a new cohort of students. (See, for example, the school profile on Hillsdale High School at the end of this chapter). This approach allows teachers to know their students and families well, to organize their teaching to take advantage of student strengths and experiences, and to address student needs.

Among students, staying together in a cohort with the same teachers over time increases the sense of community—and enables everyone to benefit from the community building that has been explicitly undertaken in the first year—while reducing the tension that often comes with negotiating a new set of

peers, especially for students who are more vulnerable. Conflicts are less likely because students develop trust. Research shows positive effects of looping that allow teachers and students to work together for longer periods of time.[17]

A 7th- and 8th-grade teacher in Daly City, CA, who teaches an interdisciplinary math and science course sequence to the same students over 2 years, explained how looping supports increased achievement for students who are often marginalized in school:

> I've had my students in math and science class for 2 years now. What strikes me most is the progress of students who often get lost in the system—the shy ones who now ask questions because they trust me, the unmotivated ones who now come in for help because they know I'll be supportive, and the defiant ones who now recognize that I'm an ally who cares for them. These are the kids who need adults' support the most, but it takes them the longest to develop relationships. Looping gives us the time to make these relationships happen.[18]

Often looping in secondary school is accomplished through the use of the small learning community cohorts previously described, which organize a team of teachers to work with a shared group of students, or advisories (see the following section in this chapter) that stay together for either 2 or 4 years. In some small learning communities, 9th- and 10th-grade humanities courses are taught in **mixed-grade classrooms**, with a 2-year curriculum cycle. Each classroom is evenly split between 9th-graders and 10th-graders, and differentiation is the norm as teachers establish systems to support and challenge students at many different skill levels to grow on a developmental path. Each year, a new group of 9th-graders comes in, but the other half of the class are returning 10th-graders who already know classroom norms and routines and help mentor the new students. The teacher does not have to spend weeks at the beginning of the year establishing a positive classroom culture because the older students guide and support the younger ones from day one. Researchers have found that these kinds of multiage, multilevel classrooms can be extremely successful for all kinds of students.[19]

Longer Grade Spans. There is also research suggesting that schools with longer grade spans, such as K–8 at the elementary level or 6–12 at the secondary level, support better student outcomes due to the longer-term relationships that are formed and the elimination of at least one disruptive transition between elementary school and secondary school.[20] In general, continuity is very important to student confidence and sense of well-being, and it facilitates students and their families understanding their environment and being well known. The findings about the gains in achievement that accompany elimination of the middle school transition may also be associated with the fact that many middle schools are not designed with the personalized supports described here that enable students to thrive.

> Continuity is very important to student confidence and sense of well-being, and it facilitates students and their families understanding their environment and being well known.

In Practice: Continuity and Personalization in a Large School

UCLA Community School (UCLA-CS) is an example of a redesigned campus and set of schools that have adopted all the features described in this chapter to support positive developmental relationships and personalization for students. It is located on the Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) Community Schools campus on the former site of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. A study tour of the Julia Richman Educational Complex in New York City informed the multiage design of UCLA-CS, which serves 4,000 students in six small schools, with some starting in transitional kindergarten (TK). The schools are the Ambassador School of Global Education (TK–5), Ambassador School of Global Leadership (6–12), New Open World Academy (TK–12), Los Angeles High School of the Arts (9–12), School for the Visual Arts and Humanities (9–12), and UCLA-CS (TK–12).

All the schools on the RFK Community Schools campus function as community schools that partner with a variety of organizations. They were created as pilot schools, part of a union- and community-based reform to support innovation by giving a set of schools autonomy of curriculum and governance in exchange for increased accountability. The schools share a common social justice vision and collaborate on sports teams and community events.

UCLA-CS was designed as a pair of schools (TK–8 and 9–12) serving 950 students for their entire school career. The design is intended to foster close and sustained relationships with students and families. As of the 2022–23 school year, most students (83%) were Latino/a; 8% were Asian American or Pacific Islander; 4% were Filipino; 2% were African American; and 2% were White. Almost all students (95%) come from low-income families; 14% of students have disabilities; and 32% are classified as English learners. Almost all students (95%) report that they use a language other than English to communicate with their families.

One of only four non-charter TK–12 schools in Los Angeles Unified School District, UCLA-CS is pioneering structures for personalized multiage learning. Students progress through the elementary grades in three multiage "dens," staying with the same teacher and classmates for 2 years—a form of looping designed to create a strong, supportive community for children that enables teachers to personalize learning. As students transition from the lower grades, the middle school continues to provide a nurturing, student-centered learning community through both a formal advisory system and the intentional grouping of students and teachers.

In 6th grade, students have two core content teachers (math/science and humanities), who also serve as their advisors. In 7th and 8th grades, students rotate across core classes and seminars, receiving support from the same advisor for 2 years. At the end of 8th grade, students transition to high school and are joined by a new cohort of students who enter from neighboring middle schools, doubling the size of the grade-level student cohorts from 60 in TK–8 to approximately 120 students in 9th through 12th grades. High school students learn in an 8-period rotating block schedule designed to support the longer time needed for active, inquiry-based learning. An advisory program anchors the high school, with students staying with the same advisor for 4 years, which helps them build strong, caring relationships.

These strategies also promote student success: In 2020–21, 100% of high school students in UCLA-CS were enrolled in the "A-G" courses required for University of California system and California State University system admissions, and 80% of graduates had successfully completed the rigorous sequence, far above district and state averages. That year the UCLA-CS graduation rate was 89%, also above district and state averages, despite the far larger proportion of students from low-income households served by the school.

Source: Quartz, K. H. (2023). *UCLA Community School: Celebrating language, culture, and community*. Learning Policy Institute.

Advisory Systems for Supporting Student Success

Advisory Groups. Advisory structures are becoming more common in secondary schools as a strategy to promote strong relationships and ensure that no student falls through the cracks. Advisory groups place 15–20 students together with a faculty advisor several times a week for ongoing academic and personal counseling and support. Ideally, this advisor is also one of the student's teachers or counselors, so advisory serves as an extension of an existing relationship. When students form a cohort taught by a shared teaching team (which may also include a counselor and a resource teacher), advisories are constructed for that cohort within that team. Many studies showing the positive impact of redesigned secondary schools note that advisories are a key strategy for personalization and improving student outcomes.[21]

Staff Advisory Roles. Advisory teachers are advocates for their students, and they often serve as the main adult point of contact for their advisees, gathering information from other teachers about what the young people need and spearheading efforts to support them. To strengthen relationships with families, advisory teachers call home frequently and host student–parent conferences. These conferences are usually student led and help ensure that families understand what students are working on and what they can do to support their success. In high school, conferences provide an opportunity for students and their families to discuss postsecondary plans and ensure students are taking the appropriate coursework for the college or career path they want to pursue. (See also Feature 8: Authentic Family Engagement.)

Advisory systems are also a form of distributed counseling that ensures attention to each student on a regular basis, not just those who can be seen occasionally by a counselor. Rather than asking guidance counselors with caseloads in the hundreds to take all the responsibility for giving all students personal attention, schools extend the reach of counseling by creating a structure through which teachers serving as advisors are given time to work with small numbers of students. In these smaller groups, teachers create a community within which students can share their experiences, learn social-emotional skills, check in with a caring adult on academics and other matters, and access additional resources. Advisors are informed by the expertise of counselors, for example, around how to support students who have experienced trauma, on the one hand, and how to support students in their college application processes, on the other. Advisors are often the point of contact for parents and other teachers to ensure that a student's needs are known. They also equip teachers to provide referrals to counseling and other resources that students need.

These small student–adult ratios are achieved by having nearly every professional staff member in the school take responsibility for an advisory, which becomes a regular part of their load rather than an add-on. In many cases, teachers advise students they also teach in class, thus increasing the amount of time they spend together. At many schools, students stay with the same advisor for at least 2 years—thus building on existing relationships over extended periods of time.

Advisory Curriculum. Successful advisories feel like an "in-school family"; they are the place where students build relationships with one another as well as with the advisory teacher. This requires intentional curriculum and skillful facilitation, often beginning with **community circles**, which are a structured space for building community to allow every student to feel safe and included. (For more on community circles, including the role they can play in restorative practices, see Feature 2: Safe, Inclusive School Climate.) Advisories are often used not only to touch base with students about their needs but also to teach a social-emotional learning curriculum, including strategies like conflict resolution that are shared across the school; to check with students about their academic work and connect students to after-school or tutoring support as needed; and to help students explore college and other post–high school options. In many cases, advisory groups take field trips to colleges and fill out college applications and financial forms in the first semester of students' senior year.

Effective advisory programs often also have **ritualized weekly routines** that involve social-emotional curricula as well as opportunities for the students themselves to take leadership roles and build a sense of collective identity. Most include space for fun activities that allow students to enjoy one another's company. For example, in one advisory, students might collaborate to do the daily Wordle game, while in another, students might take turns bringing in board games for a weekly game session.

When implementing advisory programs, it is important to think carefully about how the time will be used and provide staff with time for planning and preparation. Otherwise, if teachers are overwhelmed by other responsibilities, advisories can easily devolve into a "homeroom" period in which young people stare at their phones. Effective schools consider advisory to be a teaching period that is built into teachers' schedules just as any other course, with appropriate prep time and curricular support.

In Practice: Advisory Models

At Bronxdale High School in New York City, all students have an advisory class several times a week. The activities in advisory support social and emotional learning, academics, college and career readiness, and community building. Teachers who serve as advisors support this curriculum; counsel students; and serve as the adult links to families for information, support, and problem-solving of all kinds. Peer leaders, trained in restorative practices, also guide some advisory activities. As one guidance counselor explained: "Advisory is where the safe, supportive culture starts and then spreads through the whole school."

Schools affiliated with Big Picture Learning—a network of secondary schools that engage students in interest-driven and real-world learning experiences—implement an advisory model to support learning and development. Advisories are made up of approximately 12–25 students, and students remain in their cohort with an advisor for their 4 years of high school. A typical day at a Big Picture Learning school begins with advisory, where advisors convene students in a circle to discuss current events, social issues, and students' personal and family lives. Giving students space and agency to discuss public and private events, these circles serve to build relationships and simultaneously address students' social-emotional needs. In addition to hosting circles, advisories serve as forums where students engage in personalized learning. Advisors often allot time during advisory to confer with students individually about their academic progress and needs, to pose questions that help identify students' interests as they are developing internships, to help them develop robust projects, and to guide them through project completion.

Sources: Ancess, J., Rogers, B., Duncan Grand, D., & Darling- Hammond, L. (2019). *Teaching the way students learn best: Lessons from Bronxdale High School*. Learning Policy Institute; Bradley, K., & Hernández, L. E. (2019). *Big Picture Learning: Spreading relationships, relevance, and rigor one student at a time*. Learning Policy Institute.

As schools reallocate their resources to provide smaller classes and lower pupil loads for teachers, to create advisory systems, and to keep teachers and students together for multiple years, they also need to figure out how to provide teachers with significant time for collaborative planning and professional development, which is essential if teachers are to provide the support that students need to succeed (see Feature 7: Well-Prepared and Well-Supported Teachers). Since school budgets are finite, trade-offs are involved in the redesign process: For example, schools may secure more time for professional development by banking instructional time on some days to free up time on other days, allowing slightly larger classes, or supporting more student time in out-of-school learning experiences such as community service or internships. They may offer fewer elective courses and use dual credit options with community colleges to add variety to course offerings. Successful schools have balanced these priorities to create structures that are more effective in supporting student success than those in traditional school models. For more information on these trade-offs, see the Hillsdale High School profile in this chapter and Appendix A: Sample Budget and Staffing Models.

Although the work of redesigning high schools for personalization can be challenging, it is essential if we want all students to learn to their full potential. As a student at Vanguard High School (a member school of the New York Performance Standards Consortium) reminds us, "School should not be mass production. It should be loving and close. This is what kids need; you need love to learn."[22]

School Profile: Redesigning for Rigor and Relationships at Hillsdale High School

Photo provided by Hillsdale High School.

[Hillsdale High School](#) in San Mateo, CA, serves just over 1,600 students in an urban/suburban community, with a student body that, in 2022, was 35% Latino/a, 16% Asian, 17% other students of color (American Indian, Black, Filipino, multiracial, and Pacific Islander), and 32% White. Thirteen percent of students were English learners.

Twenty years ago, the school undertook a teacher-led conversion from a traditional school to a redesigned school organized around **small learning communities** that created teaching teams and advisories while de-tracking most classes. The results of this conversion were gains in student achievement and graduation rates, even as the school became more diverse. As of 2022, 96% of students were enrolled in the college preparatory course sequence required by the state universities, and 75% graduated having completed all those courses. Student achievement in English language arts and math far surpassed state averages.

Each fall, incoming students are placed equitably by demographic backgrounds and current achievement levels into one of three 9th- and 10th-grade **houses** named Florence, Kyoto, and Oaxaca after important medieval cities, in keeping with the school's mascot, the Knight. In the 9th and 10th grades, **teams of four teachers** (math, science, English, and social science) share approximately 112 students, serve as advisors for their students, and loop with their cohort

of students so they teach the students for 2 years. The teachers have common preparation periods and communicate regularly about the students they have in common, coordinate learning activities, and integrate curriculum to create deeper and more authentic learning experiences. There are no separate honors courses; all 9th-graders take Geometry together and then either move into Algebra I or Algebra II in 10th grade, depending on whether they took Algebra I in 8th grade.

Students in the 11th and 12th grades are divided into three "upper division" houses (Cusco, Jakarta, and Timbuktu), named after other cities throughout the world that have made major contributions to culture and society. They also have advisors who teach core classes or electives or are administrators. While there is more specialization of courses, upper division teachers, like their colleagues in the 9th- and 10th-grade houses, share students, collaboration periods, and advisory curriculum and stay with their students for 2 years.

Advisory is a key component of both lower division and upper division houses. It meets every day, usually for about 30 minutes, and is considered a full part of teachers' course loads. House teams meet every week to plan advisory curriculum together, following a general schoolwide scope and sequence but with the autonomy to develop detailed curriculum that is unique to their house and tailored to the needs of their students. Advisory curriculum is often based around weekly rituals: For example, every Monday might include time for one-on-one check-ins, and every Friday might be for community building. Across the school, Wednesday's advisory period is always "Tutorial," where students can visit any one of their teachers to make up a test, get extra help, or collaborate with peers. Lower division advisory curriculum includes key culture-building topics such as the use of language, consent, and cybersafety. Upper division advisory curriculum includes a focus on life after high school, including intensive support with college applications and career planning.

In upper division grades, students have a greater choice of courses, including community college classes, so they spend less of the day with their houses, but house teachers and advisors still play a critical role in supporting students with the school's unique graduation requirement, a yearlong senior capstone project. With support, students design their own inquiry or performance project in a subject of their choosing: math, science, English, social studies, world language, visual or performing arts, physical or health education, English language development, child development, computer science, or leadership. Before graduation, students present and defend their capstone projects, along with a reflection on their academic work and their postsecondary plans.

Successful implementation of small learning communities and advisory requires significant **time for collaboration among the staff**. Hillsdale has an 8-period school day: Students take seven courses plus advisory, and teachers teach 5 of the 8 periods in a mix of 90-minute blocks on most days and 45-minute periods on Mondays and Fridays. (See Figure 3.) Advisory is treated just like any other course, so teachers who serve as advisors teach four academic courses plus advisory. This leaves them with 3 planning periods—one to meet with their academic content team (e.g., all biology teachers share this prep period and use the time to coplan curriculum), one to meet with their house team to plan advisory and engage in what is known as "kid talk" (thinking together about individual students in their house and how best to support them), and the third to use as their individual prep period.

Figure 3. 2023–24 Hillsdale High School Bell Schedule

MONDAY		TUESDAY		WEDNESDAY		THURSDAY		FRIDAY	
0 Period	7:30 - 8:25	0 Period	7:30 - 8:25	0 Period	7:30 - 8:25	0 Period	7:30 - 8:25	Period 2	8:30 - 9:57
Period 1	8:30 - 9:17	Period 1	8:30 - 9:57	Period 2	8:30 - 9:57	Period 1	8:30 - 9:57	Brunch	9:57 - 10:07
Period 2	9:22 - 10:09	Brunch	9:57 - 10:07	Brunch	9:57 - 10:07	Brunch	9:57 - 10:07	Advisory	10:12 - 11:01
Brunch	10:09 - 10:19	Advisory	10:12 - 10:39	Tutorial	10:12 - 11:01	Advisory	10:12 - 10:39	Period 4	11:06 - 12:33
Advisory	10:24 - 10:55	Period 3	10:44 - 12:11	Period 4	11:06 - 12:33	Period 3	10:44 - 12:11	Lunch	12:33 - 1:03
Period 3	11:00 - 11:47	Lunch	12:11 - 12:41	Lunch	12:33 - 1:03	Lunch	12:11 - 12:41	Period 6	1:08 - 2:35
Period 4	11:52 - 12:39	Period 5	12:46 - 2:13	Period 6	1:08 - 2:35	Period 5	12:46 - 2:13		
Lunch	12:39 - 1:09	Period 7	2:18 - 3:45			Period 7	2:18 - 3:45		
Period 5	1:14 - 2:01								
Period 6	2:06 - 2:53								
Period 7	2:58 - 3:45								

Source: Hillsdale High School. 2023–2024 Hillsdale bell schedule.

A week in the life of a typical Hillsdale teacher: On Monday, a 10th-grade English teacher in Kyoto House teaches 1st- and 2nd-period English (her classroom is next door to her social studies partner with whom she collaborates), sees her advisory for 30 minutes after brunch—a time that supports students' physical and social needs—and then she has a collaboration time during 3rd period to work with her English team on curriculum and instruction. She teaches 4th-period English, has lunch, teaches 5th-period English, and then her Kyoto advisory team meets during 6th period to plan advisory and engage in "kid talk" about supporting students. She has 7th period as a prep period. The other days of the week, there are longer block periods. On Wednesdays and Fridays, the schedule allows for early release for further professional learning, community collaboration, whole-school professional development, department meetings, and house or governance meetings.

Hillsdale's decision to structure the school for personalization has required trade-offs. In addition to common planning periods, the school has 54 advisory sections built into the master schedule—the equivalent of adding 10 full-time staff positions. Principal Jeff Gilbert notes that the school has given up some things, such as a classified support positions, academic support classes (which were not being used effectively), and some electives. To replace some of these elective opportunities, the school has expanded its partnership with a local community college, where many seniors now take courses, many of them for dual credit. All administrators also serve as advisors, effectively adding 80% of a teaching position to the budget, while keeping administrators connected to students and to their staff colleagues. "It's not easy, but each year we chip away at it and make the budget work," explains Principal Gilbert, "because we've made a commitment to align our resources with our educational vision."

Note: For more background on Hillsdale, see: School Redesign Network. (2005). *Windows on Conversion case study: Hillsdale High School*. School Redesign Network at Stanford University; Bae, S. (2017). *It's about time: Organizing schools for teacher collaboration and learning*. Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.

Sources: Interview with Principal Jeff Gilbert; Hillsdale High School. (2022–23). 2021–2022 School Accountability Report Card; Hillsdale High School.

Additional Resources

Redesigning for Relationships

- How Being Part of a 'House' Within a School Helps Students Gain a Sense of Belonging, Gail Cornwall, KQED's MindShift: This article interviews students and staff at California middle schools and high schools to explain how being part of a "house" increases belonging.

- School Relationships, Greater Good in Education: This web page compiles information on practices for fostering positive peer relationships, teacher–student relationships, staff relationships, and family and community relationships.

- XQ Design Principle: Caring, Trusting Relationships, Mary Ryerse, XQ: XQ is an organization that supports high school redesign. This web page provides multiple examples for how to design high schools for caring, trusting relationships, along with school profiles.

Looping

- Classroom Looping: What It Is and Why Schools Should Consider It, Kelly Bielefeld, Mimio Educator: This blog post discusses the benefits of looping, a practice in which students stay with the same teacher for multiple years.

- Looping, Center for Applied Research and School Improvement, University of Minnesota: This web page summarizes research on looping and provides an annotated bibliography of studies.

Advisories

- The Advisory Guide: Designing and Implementing Effective Advisory Programs in Secondary Schools, Rachel A. Poliner and Carol Miller Lieber, Engaging Schools: This resource provides guidance and lesson plans to help secondary educators design and implement advisory programs that support community building and develop social and emotional awareness and skills.

- Are Advisory Groups 'Essential'? What They Do, How They Work, Kathleen Cushman, Coalition of Essential Schools: This article describes the powerful role that advisory groups can play in personalizing students' educational experiences and improving the tone of a school; includes suggestions on organizing advisory groups.

- Community Matters: A Facing History & Ourselves Approach to Advisory, Facing History & Ourselves: Built on a foundation of social and emotional learning, this advisory curriculum for grades 8–10 provides a school year's worth of activities, materials, and best practices for establishing an inclusive community where students can engage in honest discussion and build their voices. The appendix offers tips for designing an advisory program.

- Conflict Resolution in the High School, Carol Miller Lieber with Linda Lantieri and Tom Roderick, Educators for Social Responsibility: This book includes curriculum to be used in advisory that addresses conflict resolution, problem-solving, diversity and intergroup relations, social and emotional development, and building community in secondary schools.

- Creating Advisories: A Few Notes From the Field, Carol Miller Lieber and Rachel A. Poliner, Coalition of Essential Schools: This article examines six potential pitfalls to be aware of and avoid when designing an advisory program.

- East Palo Alto Academy's Advisory Handbook: A Guide to School-Wide Vertical and Horizontal Alignment, East Palo Alto Academy: This advisory handbook provides an example of a comprehensive advisory program and curriculum at a small high school in East Palo Alto, CA.

- Five Tips for Teaching Advisory Classes at Your School, Patrick Cook-Deegan, Greater Good Magazine: This 2017 article discusses the importance of advisory periods for relationship-building as well as how to structure them into meaningful learning opportunities.

- Middle and High School Advisory Program: Advisory Handbook, Stacey Neal, California State University, Northridge: This sample advisory handbook provides an outline of a secondary advisory program, information on the skills needed to be an effective advisor, and a list of more in-depth resources on advisory.

- Planning to Implement the Townhall and Mind & Body Components, Center for Whole-Child Education, formerly Turnaround for Children: This toolkit outlines how a school might leverage a structure like class meetings or advisories to build developmental relationships and to cultivate students' emotional awareness.