

Introduction: No More Band-Aids™

An advisory program, although an integral part of the middle school concept, has been the most difficult component to implement and the most challenging program to sustain. Middle school faculties have used numerous quick-fix measures or Band-Aids™ to keep it going, using a lot of handouts, scheduling it at just about every possible time of the day, and changing the amount of time given to it in the hope of establishing the program and bringing about the promised magic. Unable to gain adequate support, however, many middle schools have just given up and dropped the program altogether.

As the decade of the 1990s drew to a close, it was apparent that advisory programs were experiencing widespread difficulties. In *Implementing and Improving Teaming: A Handbook for Middle Level Leaders*, Rottier (2001) devoted a chapter to teaming and advisory programs and offered what could well be a lifesaving model for the advisory program:

The move to meld the teaming and advisory programs is in keeping with the middle school advocacy of curriculum integration. This model can be a powerful strategy for meeting the diverse needs of students. Some of the concerns that accompany advisory programs can be alleviated by this proposal. The power of teaming can be applied positively to the advisory component, a component that has been difficult to implement. (p. 147)

Educators who still believe in the middle school's responsibility for addressing young adolescents' personal-social needs must develop strategies to support those beliefs. They must have the boldness to make some fundamental changes in the school's structure, such as the melding of teaming and advisory. It takes courage, but the end result can be a program that exceeds their dreams.

In lieu of proposing more Band-Aids™ to save advisory programs, this book will share in ample detail an organizational model that redefines the advisory program and restructures the procedures for delivering the program, while at the same time reinvigorating the entire middle school faculty.

In addition to presenting this model in a general way, its adoption and implementation by a middle school is chronicled in detail, giving readers an inside look at just how it was put into practice.

The school that successfully pioneered the merged advisory and teaming model is De Pere Middle School. Located in De Pere, Wisconsin, a suburb of Green Bay, the school enrolls 252 students in grade seven and 284 students in grade eight. Forty-four teachers, two counselors, one principal, one assistant principal, and three teachers who also serve other units in the system constitute the professional staff. A teacher's schedule includes five instructional classes, one individual preparation period, one supervisory period, along with the 30-minute advisory period. There are three core teams, called houses, at each grade level.

In 1985 De Pere Middle School, though already titled a middle school, implemented two major changes that were designed to make it a genuine middle school. First, it developed interdisciplinary teams with daily common planning time, and second, the Homeroom Advisory Period (HAP) was instituted to function as the advisory program.

Twenty-one years later, in 2006, because the HAP was not working despite various efforts to sustain it, the staff of De Pere Middle School merged its advisory program with its team structure.



After learning about the advisory-teaming model, De Pere's School Improvement Team (SIT) discussed it. Although there were some questions and concerns about the model, the team liked the new model and realized it required no major adjustments for their school but made it possible to look at advisory through a different, clearer lens. Members were most supportive of partnering core and encore teachers to plan activities. They also were in favor of including activities in Period X that were related to academics along with those that addressed students' social and emotional needs. After a full discussion of this model's advantages and disadvantages, the entire staff, with high hopes, decided to implement it.

The staff then created a vision of FleXtime, the name chosen by the faculty for Period X, with this description:

A 30-minute period at the beginning of each day during which students participate in a variety of activities developed and coordinated by core and encore teachers. FleXtime activities are customized to enhance the social, emotional, and academic skills of the unique members of each house. This is a fluid period of time that provides the flexibility needed to address the ever-changing needs of our students.

The School Improvement Team identified the following principles around which the merger of teaming and advisory would be centered and activities planned:

1. FleXtime activities would be based primarily on student needs because they would be assigned to FleXtime with faculty who knew the students and could ascertain their needs.
2. Establishing one-to-one relationships between core and encore team members and their students in FleXtime would be of fundamental importance.
3. Keeping in mind the dual focus (social-emotional and academic), each team would design its own curriculum for FleXtime.
4. Scheduling the activities would be a joint responsibility of the core and encore teachers.
5. One regular planning period per week would be used to plan and organize the overall direction of the team's FleXtime.
6. Where necessary, core team members would supplement the weekly core-encore planning effort to ensure adequate preparation for the FleXtime activities.

During the first year of implementing the merger at De Pere, there were 22 core teachers and an identical number of available encore staff members, making the assignments fairly easy.

Today's schools must prepare students to be positive contributors in society. The FleX program at De Pere Middle School aims at achieving this goal by providing students learning experiences that encourage personal, social, and academic growth.

—Meghan Damsheuser, Eighth Grade Teacher

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Preparing Teams for the Merger

Teaming facilitates the use of varied activities that advance students' learning. When teaming works well, the middle school's curricular and instructional programs function at a high level. But if teaming works only at a limited level, then the school will not achieve its goals. Thus, before the advisory program and the teaming program are merged, administrators and staff must scrutinize the existing teaming arrangement and make necessary improvements. If teams are not already operating effectively, they cannot expect to merge successfully with the advisory program, for the marriage will just add to existing problems.

Conditions needed for effective teams

For the power of teaming to be used to energize the advisory concept, the following conditions should be present.

1. **The priority for all teams is to increase the academic performance of students.** Many teams have become reactive rather than proactive. In the reactive mode, team planning time tends to be spent primarily on resolving student behaviors and dealing with housekeeping responsibilities. Teams often unconsciously perceive these items as more important than working on the more critical instructional and curricular issues. Such teams will often need professional development on the importance of establishing measurable goals, ways to monitor them, and strategies to assess the team's performance in achieving those goals. Research studies have demonstrated the importance of teams' having a focus on student achievement and meaningful student-teacher relationships (Roney, Anfara, & Brown, 2008).
2. **The workload is shared.** While teams usually agree to share the workload, often they fail to delineate each team member's role; so when a job comes up, time is spent deciding who will do what. Establishing roles such as parent contact, liaison with administration, recorder of meeting minutes, and liaison with encore staff results in greater team efficiency.
3. **Written rules for the team operation are in place.** Unfortunately, it is often assumed that because teachers are professional people, establishing team rules is not necessary. Confirming beginning and ending times for team meetings, expecting compliance with attendance rules, and dealing with interruptions are among considerations that call for clear understanding and are best committed to writing.

Monthly schedules for FlexTime

After the school year began, the houses began planning monthly activities for FlexTime. The actual examples and summaries that follow represent well the variety of activities that FlexTime teachers generated for their students. While it is sometimes difficult to categorize an activity as purely academic or social-emotional, a summary box following each month's activities provides a quick review of the month's activities by category and shows the balance achieved.

The January FlexTime calendar of events is somewhat typical; it included a unit on perception versus reality, an interdisciplinary unit called Greek Thrones, and a rotation on healthy lifestyles.

MONTH OF JANUARY—GRADE SEVEN

- Jan 2 Students share winter break experiences.
- Jan 3 Geography Bee: The entire seventh grade will be the audience for the seventh grade students who qualified to participate in the Geography Bee.
- Jan 4–11 Perception vs. Reality rotation.
- Jan 12 All-school Geography Bee: The entire seventh and eighth grades will be the audience for students who qualified for the All-School Geography Bee based on how well they did at the grade level bees.
- Jan 15–19 Interdisciplinary unit on Greek Thrones.
- Jan 22 Clean lockers and organize binders.
- Jan 23 Healthy Lifestyles.
- Jan 24 Finish quote assignment from reading class.
- Jan 25 Healthy Lifestyles.

January FlexTime Summary of Time Use

Academic	8 days
Social-Emotional	9 days
Housekeeping	1 day

ASSESSING THE TEAMING STRUCTURE

Directions: For each item, please indicate the degree to which the factor is characteristic of the teaming structure in our middle school. Place the letter representing your response in the blank to the left of each statement using this key.

- | | |
|-----------------------|----------------|
| A. significant degree | D. not at all |
| B. moderate degree | E. do not know |
| C. slight degree | |

In our middle school . . .

- _____ 1. The administration provides the leadership necessary to help teams reach their potential.
- _____ 2. The administration provides professional development to help teams realize their potential.
- _____ 3. A job description exists for the team leader.
- _____ 4. Team leaders are selected based on their leadership potential.
- _____ 5. Specific professional staff development activities have been provided for team leaders.
- _____ 6. Team leaders meet on a regular basis with the administration.
- _____ 7. Team leaders are recognized and rewarded for their work.
- _____ 8. Teams are required each year to identify general goals and one or two highly specific and measurable goals.
- _____ 9. Teams develop specific strategies to achieve their goals.
- _____ 10. Team leaders prepare weekly reports for the principal on how their teams are functioning.
- _____ 11. The principal meets with teams at least once every nine weeks to discuss each team's progress on achieving its goals.
- _____ 12. Teams submit an end-of-year report detailing the efforts made and the results obtained on their goals.
- _____ 13. Teams develop and follow a weekly schedule of activities.
- _____ 14. Teams experience interruptions to team meetings.
- _____ 15. One or two team members carry most of the team's responsibilities.
- _____ 16. The administration works with team leaders to resolve difficult team problems.
- _____ 17. Funds are provided for teams to expend at their discretion within guidelines.
- _____ 18. Teams hold celebrations that build a sense of pride in belonging to a group and a sense of identification with it.
- _____ 19. All team members receive training in the fundamental dynamics of teaming, including those teachers who joined the staff after teaming was initiated.
- _____ 20. Teams have been taught the skills of decision making, problem solving, and conflict management.