



PART ONE Personalizing Your
School Environment

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Advisories

Believe in Students First

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There are two things you notice about Richard Esparza right away: he smiles contagiously, and he wavers not a bit. Those traits have gone a long way toward helping him transform Granger High School over the past eight years, raising the school from the lowest-performing school in the state when he arrived as principal in 1999 to one of the highest-performing schools in 2006. Facing challenges that many perceive as obstacles to learning—high poverty, minority, crime, and dropout rates, and low reading levels, test scores, and student engagement—Richard Esparza has been undeterred, determined that the students could achieve, and resolved not to lose a single one. Convinced that the strategies for creating a manageable system at Granger can work anywhere, he shares the story of his school’s remarkable turnaround.

I live in a high-poverty, migrant community where, for some students in my school, 13 people live in a house, another two live in an outside trailer, the mom lives in another trailer, and a student sorts bitterroots in the living room where he sleeps with his cousin.

This community in Granger, Washington, leads to some challenging demographics in Granger High School: 90% free and reduced lunch, 21% migrant, 32% bilingual, and 90% students of color—and these are all excuses that people gave as reasons the kids here couldn’t learn. What do you think our school was like? Do you think we had gang problems? Do you think we had kids smoking

pot in the bathrooms and in the bushes? Yes, yes, and yes. Plus we had low expectations from students, staff, and even parents. All of those things were in place. Some will say it's about color and poverty, but poverty is what cuts across all races—it's the biggest indicator across the board to determine whether a school will be successful or not. When I came to Granger High in the spring of 1999, our school had the highest reported crime rate in the state of Washington, our test scores were among the lowest in the state, and we had a dismal 58% graduation rate.

We realized that to see improvements in these areas we would have to change our system to push students to experience success and not lose students by focusing on three basic principles:

1. Make sure students are attending school
2. Make sure they are getting good grades
3. Help them find a career path or career goals

The key was to find a way that would let us track attendance and grades closely, and help us guide students to discover their own passions and interests. We needed a system that promoted a personal connection to the students, something that offered a manageable ratio of students to adults, that involved parents and caregivers, and that helped students engage with the school and their education. In short, we needed a revolution in our high school.

Break It Down

The reality is that in the public school system, the numbers often do not make it feasible for us to truly catch all the students, particularly those in danger of dropping out. For example, when I started at Granger, the student to counselor ratio was 400:1 and teachers saw 140 students a day.

Think about it: if there are 400 students to one counselor, what happens when the student goes to get help from that counselor? Sometimes they're out to lunch. Other times they're working with an academically proficient student, or a pregnant student, or a struggling student. In the beginning my more proficient students were frustrated with the counselors, saying things like, "Mr. Esparza, they're always working with the pregnant girls, or the drug abuse kids, the counselor is always tied up and we never can get the academic support we need." On the other side, there were the lost kids who often didn't have enough courage to

go see the counselor, or if they did finally get up the courage, saw that the counselors were tied up doing something else.

How many times would a student get turned away before finally giving up?

Our traditional education system is built around managing too many students. It's impossible to know them well, to carefully track their progress, or to help them identify their interests. Students need someone to pay attention, offer encouragement, convince them that their presence at the school is important, and believe in their potential. If you were to say to a coach—could you coach 400 kids and really get to know them and help them be successful? What do you think that coach would tell you? It's just not doable. So what's the answer?

You have to break down the system into manageable numbers.

20:1 Advisories Work

I often hear, “Gosh, that’s not doable, we’re a very, very large school.” When you look at our whole state of Washington and see the certificated staff to student ratio, it’s about a 20:1 ratio across the board if you include the librarians and administrators. So can our systems truly be broken down? The numbers say yes, it is possible.

I hadn’t done advisories before. It was a leap of faith but something I was willing to try, since Granger had the lowest academic performance in the state when I arrived: 11% writing, 20% reading, and 4% math.

To begin with, we had a 15-minute time period set aside for Channel 1, and 15 minutes for silent, sustained reading. I tried to negotiate with Channel 1 for bigger TVs. Kids try to be cool and won’t wear glasses but then they can’t see the TV. I didn’t get the larger TVs, so I decided in that first year to use those 30 minutes for students to engage in reading instead, and allow for teachers to do paperwork. I kept thinking about what else we could do for our students during this 30-minute period.

During the second year, I learned that my staff didn’t know what it takes for students to graduate. I realized that if we were to break this system down, how much more powerful it could be if we each took care of students as if they were our own kids, be quasi-parents. And if you don’t have kids, then you’d take care of them the way you would have wanted to be treated.

I explained to my staff that this was only going to help them. In a high-poverty, high-failing school, if 40% of students are failing, that means 40 out of 100

students are failing—40 kids that you are supposed to connect with to make it work for them. If you break the system down further, every adult has eight students instead of 40. It's unlikely that you are going to connect with 40 students, but it's a lot more realistic to expect it to happen if you have five or eight in an advisory group to try to find a way to light their fire. Everyone can work five at-risk students in addition to their top students, middle students, and lesson planning. It's still a challenge, but the smaller numbers makes sense.

I hired an instructional facilitator to do all the leg work for creating advisories—the advisors don't even have to make copies. We are using Navigation 101, a curriculum designed to help students with job shadows, career goals, interest inventory, college statement, and so forth, under the basic philosophy that encourages students to attend school, get good grades, and define a career goal. Undeclared majors are OK, because remember how hard it was to figure out what you wanted to do for a job? But you need to be able to read, write, and do the math at or above your grade level.

I had my first group of advisees with me for two years, sharing an advisory with a counselor. In trying to figure out how to make this work, we made the mistake of selecting all at-risk kids, which led to a *Welcome Back Kotter* group of kids. The kids would feed off each other. There was also no continuity—with two days with the counselor as advisor, and two days with me. I'd hear, "Ms. Bush said we could do this, this, and this."

We also experienced the opposite extreme—one teacher convinced me to let him have all FFA (Future Farmers of America) students, who pretty much rested on their laurels and became an elitist club.

We realized that we needed to balance advisory groups by reading level: fourth and fifth grade level readers with ninth and tenth grade level readers. That way kids can see role models of studious peers. The expectation is that they are going to raise their skill level. And like professional sports teams, we need to allow people to be traded. If you're not getting along, if personalities don't match, it's OK to change within grade level advisories.

This system won't work meeting only twice a year or once a month. Advisory classes at our school meet Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, each focusing on specific content, for example reading, math, portfolio development, homework, or special topics.

Teachers give all the mentors/advisors progress reports every other Friday. I am working with five at-risk students. With every mentor taking care of five

at-risk students, now you're talking about a system that's truly going to be able to keep track of kids. That's a doable system. *Five*. If I had 50, plus the other 100 students I'm supposed to take care of, it's just too much. That's what we're expecting our educators to do, and that's why we're losing the kids in the shuffle.

I expect my advisors/mentors to contact and take care of their 20 kids as if they're their own. So they are the ones who are going to contact the parents, letting them know that so and so is not getting the job done.

We don't lose kids anymore. We know who has problems with depression, drugs/alcohol, their boyfriend/girlfriend, or who is pregnant. OK, you're smoking pot—that's not good. One student showed up under the influence of marijuana to a parent conference. The message was, "*You are busted. You're going to the drug/alcohol counselor.*" One year at the prom, one of the seniors had a miscarriage on the way to the prom. As awful as it was for her, is that a student we were going to lose? No, my counselor was available to follow up with her. Her advisor would know and be able to support her. Our thinking is: if kids have problems you can't solve, what do you do as a parent? Don't you refer them to a specialist? We do the same as advisors.

I have 18 advisees this year that I've had since eighth grade, and they're all juniors now. All I've done is keep track of their attendance and their grades. I've

Our Goals for Advisory

1. Every student will be well-known, both personally and academically, by at least one adult staff member.
2. Every student will be pushed to increase their reading level and math level.
3. Every student will be challenged to meet rigorous academic standards in an appropriate educational program.
4. Every student will be provided with opportunities to experience the benefits of community membership and to develop and practice leadership.
5. Every student will be prepared for whatever he or she chooses to do after graduation, with a strong transcript, a career pathway, a plan, and a portfolio.

also helped them find a career goal. As much as I love them, they're getting to the age at which it's time to push them out of the nest. They're going to be 18, and they're going to graduate. They've gone on job shadows, tried to find the career they want, worked on reading skills or math skills, gotten their homework done or worked at establishing relationships during that advising time.

I think of the journey I've been on with so many of them—my job is taking care of my 18 kids, but I take care of all of them, and keep track of the data. At the sophomore class meeting, trying to be an advisor to all on a larger scale, I tell them about a poster I have in my office, called the Three Roads of Life. On it, there's a line that starts when you're born and ends when you die. In between, you're going to be on the road. The top road of life has good-to-great income (anything that has benefits). The average income road of life may have benefits, and can be a really dicey area at the end of your journey. The low income road of life (minimum wage, likely no benefits) is where 90% of our kids come from. I tell the students the kinds of grades that are attached to it: you have to get As, Bs, and Cs to be on the good-to-great road.

I don't make the rules of the system, but I do know how it works. I try to inspire them to take the top road of life. I know the kids we haven't captured because I see their grades, and their grades tell me everything.

Include the Parent or Caregiver

How about parents? How important are they? I'll ask you: Who helped you? Who helped you get to where you are? Maybe it wasn't a mom and dad but it was likely to be someone you lived with. Maybe you lived with grandparents or friends of the family, but somebody gave you that support.

As educators, we can't do this by ourselves. With 70% of a student's life spent away from school, if we don't make caregivers a part of this equation, we're missing a big part. (I say *caregiver* because in this high-poverty area, 25% of the students I see have a mom and dad at home. The rest are with their grandmother, friend of the family, aunt, uncle, sister, brother. They live with someone but more often than not it's not the mom and dad.)

When I started at Granger, the test scores showed that 10% of the students were reading at standard. *Ten percent*. And only 23% of parents were coming to conferences. The staff was happy with the 23%. When I asked why, I learned that it was because there had been 10% participation the previous year. Part of the

problem was that conferences were being scheduled during the school day, and in a high-poverty area where parents don't have time off, if they don't work, they don't get paid. So we moved the conferences to the evenings and still only 25 parents out of 800 came in.

I looked at this statistic: 10% of kids were meeting standards at the same time that 10% of the parents were coming to conferences.

The turning point came during my first year as principal when a parent came to me in tears. First she was mad because her son was suspended, and I rarely suspend kids. But this kid deserved to be suspended. She told me, "Please let him back into school. I just want him to graduate, he's a senior." I looked up his credits—he had six credits to his name, PE and some vocational credits. I had to be the one to break the news to her and say, "I'm sorry, ma'am, your son only has six credits. We need 24 to graduate."

That's when the tears came and she said, "That's not possible. I have fed him breakfast. I have given him lunch money for four years. I need him to graduate. I don't have a husband at home. I need him to get a good job so he can help the family out." It wasn't possible. Six credits and here he was a senior and it was spring of his senior year.

That's when I made a commitment that we need to change our system, we need to connect with parents, we need to communicate because I never want to go through this again where I'm looking at a parent, having to break the news that there's no way their child is going to graduate on time. One way or the other we're going to get them to the conferences and it's going to be student-led. We do this by developing a team that *includes* the parent.

In the system we set up, each advisor meets 18 sets of caregivers. In the other system, a teacher would meet 150×2 , or close to 300 parents, and think, "Am I really getting messages across?" Students now feel, "I really work hard because I don't want to have to explain to my parents why I'm not doing well at parent-teacher conferences."

I met the parents of my advisees in the spring of eighth grade year. It was amazing to hear some parents learn and be surprised. Family dynamics tend to be broken in a high-poverty school like mine. You have to roll up your sleeves and go into the good, bad, and ugly of life. I met them again freshman year, and with the personalized education plan, we meet twice a year and communicate in between. We send paper progress reports home every two weeks. If a parent contacts me and says, "My son isn't bringing progress reports home . . . can I come

by and pick them up?” I respond, “No. That’s your responsibility. . . . your end of the bargain.” Sometimes you end up counseling parents to be parents.

I tell the parents about the Three Roads of Life, and ask them, “Where do you want your kids?” I commonly hear that they don’t want their kids to have to do what they do. “I work hard so they have it easier.”

Most of my parents don’t have an education. They haven’t gone to third or fourth grade. If they don’t have an education, I have to educate them. I’m talking about starting with the basics—A, B, C, D, and F. One student had convinced his parents that F was good. I’ve trained my parents—a quarter is 45 days, a semester is 90 days, credits add up, A is great, B is OK, and so forth. This is where I came from. My own parents didn’t have an education but they learned the difference between an A, B, C, D, and F. And once they knew that, that was it, they held us to that standard. We send a monthly calendar in the mail and tell the parents to be looking for it. I love this system.

For the eighth time now, 100% of caregivers have attended conferences— whoever is there—foster parent, friends, or relatives. I will accept no less than 100% of our parents. Teachers are proud of the fact that we’ve got 100% participation. They compete with each other to see who can get the most participants.

Believe in the Students

We believe that all students can achieve. We have learned that students who come to high school with low academic skills can achieve. People often place blame on why students don’t achieve. In elementary school they blame the parent, in middle school they blame the elementary school, and in high school they blame the middle school. But regardless of why, some students arrive at high school with low academic skills. What can you do about it? You have to start with the premise that even though they’ve come with low academic skills, it doesn’t mean that they can’t change in the high school.

I believe in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. If the most basic needs of food, shelter, safety, and support are met, and the personal need for love and belonging is met, it’s amazing what students can do. If students feel somebody truly cares about them and is going to push them to get through school, they can and do rise to meet our expectations.

One way we support students in their learning is through the Personalized Education Plan (PEP). In our state, any student who did not meet standards in

seventh grade is required to develop a student learning plan. In my view, every student needs a plan.

The PEP is very basic. The idea is to allow students to sit down in a private setting with an adult to guide them and review their educational progress to date. It is important that students recognize that it is their education and their future. The PEP centers around reading scores, math scores, and requires students to identify a career goal. It's a short, simple agreement between the student and the caregiver. It's not a hard plan. It asks students, "What do you agree to do for your future?" It also asks adults to identify what they agree to do as a support person. I am the support person, and the parent.

Data are an important part of the PEP. In the student-led conferences, you can see the student's current grade level in reading and math, and the expectation is that he or she is at or above grade level. Students take the WASL (Washington Assessment of Student Learning), a state assessment during sophomore year, and have to meet that standard. I have all students at Granger High take the ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery) as juniors, explaining to them that this is an assessment that is part of the real world.

Students need to know what their skill level is in order to get better. By exposing them to real expectations, they understand what they need to know and can develop strategies for improving any areas necessary. We have English teachers available before school, math teachers after school, and teachers available during lunch. By knowing what their level is, students are motivated to show up and seek extra help.

How do we keep high expectations? We changed our mission statement. It now reads, "*All students will be expected to reach . . .*" Formerly, it was: "*All students will be given the opportunity . . .*" It took all the responsibility off us and gave it to the students, and they could choose to take it or not. Now students know that we expect them to be successful, and we're going to contact the parents if they're not getting the job done.

We have implemented a referral program so that any student who falls below a C is referred to the academic success program before or after school or during lunch break, or both. In order to exit out of this program, students must achieve a C or better.

Since I came to Granger High in Spring 1999, we've gone from being the school with the highest reported crime rate in the state of Washington to the one with the lowest reported crime rate. At the same time, test scores went from

the lowest to the highest, and we went from a 58% graduation rate to a 90% graduation rate in 2006.

The national dropout statistics haven't really changed since the 1970s. The graduation rate nationwide for African American, Latino, and Native American students is 50% or less. Comparing the lowest income quartile to the highest, the dropout rate goes up six times. This is unacceptable. We need to operate school like a business. In a business, if you were only producing 30% of products that work, you'd be out of business. Even 60 or 70% would not do. That's what I'm looking at. I'm not happy with 90%. That means our system didn't work for 10% of the students. I have pictures of people on my wall, every percentage is represented by faces—those are the people who are going out in society, either to improve society or to be lost souls mired in a cycle of poverty that never ends.

Lessons Learned

The only way we truly save this world is one person at a time. At Granger High, we're experiencing a whole system that is working for students, and I've seen that it is all so doable. Here are some lessons we've learned along the way that may help other school systems in their efforts to connect with and not lose students:

- You have to believe in students in order for them to believe in themselves.
- Know your clients. Understand the cultural influences on parents when you're trying to connect with them; that's what successful businesses do. For example, in some Hispanic cultures the traditional handshake is rude and confrontational and should begin more informally by asking questions like, "How are you doing? How's the family? How are the kids? Or "Let's have Rodrigo tell us how he's doing." Learn your cultures and understand who you serve. That way parents and other caregivers will feel more welcome.
- Learn from your neighbor. Don't recreate the wheel—visit and learn from places that are being successful. It's like sports—when another team has won 18 times and lost twice and my program has lost 18 times and won twice, I want to know how that team is doing it. Find a place that has already done the kind of work that you're considering and learn from them. People are willing to share.
- Prepare and train your staff. Provide the time. You can't just say, "Read this and let's get to it." Create ways for staff to collaborate. At Granger High, we

have early release every Wednesday, a two-hour block of time to work together consistently. Before committing to this schedule, it was once a month for three hours, but then professional development became like a flavor of the month. Have a systemic approach to staff development, pulling time out of the school day to get it done so it pays off for staff and students.

- Expose students to a different reality. In larger towns and cities when students live in the middle class or above, they understand that you have to have money, and they have awareness of what is going on in the world around them. Most students here haven't been far from a small town and believe this is what reality is. We take them on field trips, for example, to an Idaho theme park as a reward instead of senior skip day and open their eyes to possibilities beyond their own small town.
- Allow kids to try, try again. Promote retesting, as most real world exams permit a retake, for example driving tests, bar exams, SATs, and so on. At the prom recently, one of the kids in her prom dress said, "Ms. Cartwright, don't forget I'm going to retake that test." We expect students to learn the material, and sometimes it just takes time to get it all down, so allowing students multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning provides that extra push they need to ensure future success and sustained effort.
- Break down the negative belief system. People have a hard time looking at themselves—they've tried their hardest, done everything they can, and some kids still fail. Students will think they're failures if we let them, and it creates a cycle of failure until you show them a different way. With the right support, students can reach a standard. Build that up. Maybe the system wasn't establishing a relationship or connection with the kids, but adults can reshape the system—we can create connections and build relationships with students to help meet their needs and reshape those negative beliefs.
- To convince your staff, do the research. It's all about the *BFOs*: the Blinding Flashes of the Obvious. When we broke down the numbers I asked my staff, "Guys, do you want to take care of five at-risk kids as an advisor and try to get them to succeed?" We all knew that we weren't reaching the larger number of 40–50 at-risk students, and academic teachers see between 140 and 180 students a day. When we broke down the numbers and showed them that it really was possible, teachers really connected with that one.

- Celebrate the successes and make the celebrations public. Some people don't believe it can be done because they haven't seen a high school like Granger be successful. I'm here to tell you, "It's being done, academic success is happening in unexpected schools." "*Si puede.*" "Yes it can be done." People who have doubts begin to believe after they start seeing the results.
- Have fun, and get it done at the same time.

It boils down to this: you have to have a belief so strong that nothing will make it waver. For me, I was fortunate that I grew up in a life of poverty, part of a migrant family with 10 people in the house, and at the tail end of moving around. I went to three schools, ending up in the school 20 miles down the road from where I am now. When I see kids who are migrants, kids of color, I look at myself as not being different from any of them and I think, "How can I get my students to do what I've done?" I never would waver from the basic belief that all students truly can reach their academic and social potential, but it's a paradigm shift for many. I never had a paradigm shift—for me it's exciting and awesome to see it happen. It's also very satisfying to know how many of our students are going to graduate and go on to college, breaking the cycle of poverty and creating ripple effects in their family for generations to come.

Reflection Questions

1. What do the data at your school tell you about student engagement?
2. Does your school have an advisory program in place?
 - a. If so, how do you know it is effective? Is there a plan for continuous assessment and adjustments to meet the ongoing needs of students?
 - b. Is your advisory program used simply for community building and development of social skills, or does it provide support for students' academic growth and college-exploration activities?
 - c. If not, how could implementing an advisory program benefit students in your school?
 - d. How would your school organize the planning and implementation activities involved in creating and sustaining a high-quality advisory program for all students?

3. Is there a group within the school that can take responsibility for continuous development and growth of the advisory program? How can students be involved in advisory development?
4. How will or does your school provide ongoing professional development for advisors?

Resources

The Advisory Library. Educators for Social Responsibility, www.esrnational.org
Sixteen books full of activities and resources that can be used in advisory plus a handbook with tips for how to use the books.

DiMartino, J., & Clarke, J. (2008). *The Heart of School Principal Leadership*, 9(3). Reston, VA: NASSP.

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DiMartino, J., Clarke, J., & Wolk, D. (eds.) (2003). *Personalized Learning: Preparing High School Students to Create their Futures*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

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Osofsky, D., Sinner, G., & Wolk, D. (2003). *Changing Systems to Personalize Learning: Discover the Power of Advisories*, Providence, RI: Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory. Download at http://www.alliance.brown.edu/db/ea_catalog.php

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