

## **Timberlane Regional Middle School Advisory Promoting a Positive Learning Community and Student Leadership Opportunities**

**By Michael Hogan**

*“If you believe that young adolescents are different from young children and older adolescents, then the schools that serve them should be too”* -John Lounsbury. What would a school look and feel like in order to meet the needs of its’ middle school students? Can you sense an atmosphere of excitement and positive energy when you enter a building full of young adolescents? Is your middle school a developmentally responsive environment that engages students through motivation and challenge, while helping them discover who they are?

Truly exceptional middle schools address young adolescent development, perhaps the stage of life with more physical and emotional changes than any other, by creating a culture of personalized learning and individualized growth through its’ connectedness. When you walk in the front door of Timberlane Regional Middle School (TRMS) you immediately sense the pulse of a school that is warm and inviting and where all students matter. Instantly, you have made a connection, quite possibly because someone held the door open for you or greeted you with a smile. With approximately 1,100 students, TRMS is one of the largest middle schools in the state of New Hampshire. However, each day our learning community dedicates itself to building positive relationships within a collaborative learning environment. It begins with our daily advisory time, in which we seek to inspire students through our thoughtful and innovative approach.

TRMS students begin their exploration in their 20 minute morning advisory. Just as a runner stretches before he begins his labor, advisories provide the opportunity to stretch the muscles of our students and staff a bit before they begin the academic challenges ahead. Students and teachers form relationships that support learning, all in an environment that is responsive to the social-emotional needs of young adolescents. Our advisory is the place where we energize and organize, plan and plot, laugh and discuss anything relevant to middle school. We have been innovative and developmentally responsive in our comprehensive grade 6-8 approach to advisory by offering a thematic sequence for students to follow.

What separates the TRMS advisory model from most schools is the leadership opportunities we offer 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. Students may participate in the Leadership Academy, where 8<sup>th</sup> graders lead 6<sup>th</sup> grade students in character building activities two times per month. Student leaders operate with the theme of “leadership is influence.” Now in its’ third year, over 70

student leaders are currently participating, many having experienced the program as 6<sup>th</sup> graders. Other leadership opportunities exist in special interest areas. The physical education advisors have seventy-two 8<sup>th</sup> grade student leaders who begin their day setting up the gym for classes and periodically design and lead 6<sup>th</sup> grade students in phys. ed. related advisory activities. The music department has created three leadership advisories; in jazz band, orchestra and chorus. Music leaders practice on even numbered days and create advisory mini-concerts throughout the year to showcase their talent to their peers. The additional practice time has helped produce a jazz band that has performed at the NH Scholar Leader Dinner and the annual New England League of Middle Schools (NELMS) annual conference. Grade 8 advisors have created additional leadership advisories in film production, art, world language and drama. Students may also participate in the Student Senate advisory which acts in part as a governing body for the school as well as an outreach partner with our senior citizen groups. Many students participate in more than one leadership advisory, responding to their desire to make our school a great place.

All TRMS students are supported through advisory and the relationships that are created. Seventh grade students have a service learning component built in to their team-directed advisory. Teams have taken on many projects such as our school recycling program, food drive, letters to soldiers and ownership of our lost and found. Seventh graders are quick to respond with fundraising efforts that provide relief to natural disasters, emergencies or humanity causes. Sixth grade students are introduced to our core values of respect, responsibility and right choices through discussions, games, poems, storytelling and music. These character discussions continue throughout the middle grades in advisory and on team. In addition, each 6<sup>th</sup> grade advisory has Leadership Academy students who join them and lead games, conversations and activities.

The TRMS faculty understands that before students care to learn, they must know we care. Now in our 4<sup>th</sup> year of advisory, school culture has improved significantly because we start the day in a stress free environment, supporting students and building trusting relationships. Teachers, guidance counselors, administrators, librarians and specialists act as advisors, promoting a fully inclusive approach to our delivery system. Advisory is not a separate entity at TRMS, it is part of the fabric of our day. It is an opportunity to build community by breaking down a large school into many small groups that provide ongoing support for young adolescents. The benefits are felt across school culture and provide a positive learning environment where all children can succeed.