

A sample Advisory curriculum:

# Thinking About Community



## What is *community*?

“Community is the tie that binds students and teachers together in special ways, to something more significant than themselves: shared values and ideals. It lifts both teachers and students to higher levels of self-understanding, commitment, and performance – beyond the reaches of the shortcomings and difficulties they face as individuals in their daily lives. Community can help teachers and students be transformed from a collection of ‘I’s’ to a collective ‘we,’ thus providing them with a unique and enduring sense of identity, belonging, and place.”

- Thomas Sergiovanni in *Building Community in Schools*

**A speech that you can make:** *“We want Riverdale students to feel a sense of “ownership” at the school. In other words, we want the school to mean more to you than a place of business – like a bank or a deli. We want you to feel responsible for, and invested in, how this school functions, how people feel here, and how successful we all are as we work toward some commonly held goals. So we will spend time in Advisory talking about the school community.”*

### Activities:

**1) Brainstorm:** Ask students to quickly scribble on a piece of paper the personal goals that they have in the following realms for themselves between now and high school graduation: Academic / Social / Other (athletic, spiritual, career...)

**2) Ask and discuss:** In what ways does your success with these personal goals depend on the cooperation of others? More specifically, which goals depend on a purely business-like relationship with others, and which depend on a more *personal* connection? (By “personal” we do not necessarily mean an intimate friendship. Professional relationships, like those between students and teachers, can involve real sharing and emotion, and feel “personal” as well.)

**A useful clarification: The Continuum of Community**

**Practical** \_\_\_\_\_ **Superficial** \_\_\_\_\_ **Real**  
**Co-existence** \_\_\_\_\_ **commonality** \_\_\_\_\_ **community**

**Degrees of community:**

**Practical co-existence:** We are all in this school together, and we must get along or else everyone suffers. The practical issues involve a group of “I’s” creating agreements that will allow them to coexist in one place. Once that co-existence is established, then nothing else is desired, and no sense of “we” is felt in the school.

**The superficial “We”:** We share a superficial common identity, like being a Maverick. At this point on the continuum, we share much in common, but what we share does not touch our hearts.

**Real community:** People bound by a shared set of ideas and ideals.

**3) Final questions about the continuum above:**

Ask: What other “superficial common identities” do we share besides being “Mavericks”?

Ask: What “ideas and ideals” can Riverdale students, teachers and parents possibly be guided by? What commonalities have the power to make us feel closer to one another? Make a list!

Ask: Why do you think that some students don’t care about feeling a “real” sense of community at school? Why should they care? What’s the pay-off?

# Clarifying Our Duty to Others:

Classic essential questions grow out of individual vs. society conflicts. Classic issues in high schools do too.

Below are scenarios that can be used to discuss “how should individuals be honored here, at the same time that we protect the group?”

## Questions to ask about the scenarios:

- What issues are raised in this scenario?
- What should individual students do?
- What prevents individual students from doing what they should?
- What “community value” (norms that are necessary for the group to be safe and prosper) should be protected in this case?

## The scenarios:

- 1) Two students are stealing iPods. Over a short period of time, a large percentage of the student body – including the victims of these thefts – know who is stealing. But nobody makes a report to the Principal, or teachers, or parents.
- 2) A student is vocal about “hating Riverdale”, and speaks loudly and often about this point-of-view. They are motivated for personal reasons – they have been hurt by peers in some way, and are not being academically successful. But their attacks are more general: “No one here knows anything about life.” “This place is stupid.” “The rules here are ridiculous.” “Everyone here is a stuck-up rich kid.” And... “The sandwiches are bad.”
- 3) A group of students has become fascinated with weed use. They identify themselves as stoners, develop a sense of superiority about it, and talk about their use often when only other students are listening.
- 4) Two students are best friends, and isolate themselves from others. They clearly act depressed and withdrawn. Other students feel excluded from them, and stop really noticing how these two are feeling day to day. But if you were to ask anyone in their class if these two are depressed they would, after just a moment of reflection, say “yes, they are... I hadn’t thought about it in that way...”
- 5) Two students in a class are the “queen bees”, and are fiercely critical of other students. Many fear their comments, especially since their worst criticisms are made on-line. The power of these two students increases as they become more intimidating, and as many girls in the class allow themselves to be intimidated.
- 6) Students see high school only as a way to successfully get into college, and build their individual successes. They are not conscious of building a better school that they can leave for students who follow.
- 7) Students leave a mess in the Maverick Room during lunch.