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November School Spotlight: WMS

Call to Adventure:
Advisory as the Heart of Middle School

Be BOLD! Be West





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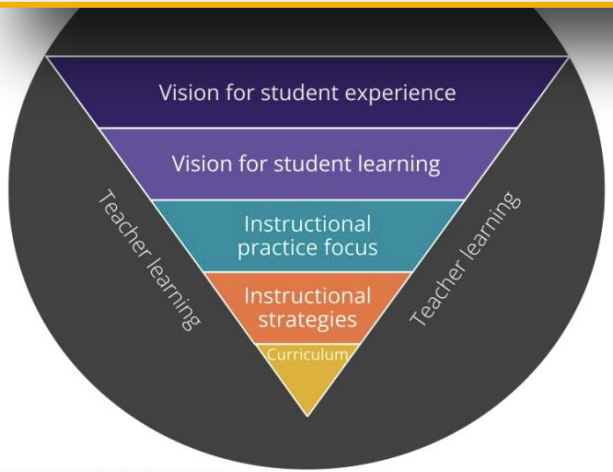
Getting to Know West Middle School

- Population - approximately 900 students this year
  - 6th - 280 students
  - 7th - 310 students
  - 8th - 310 students

Student Experience Goal 2026-2027

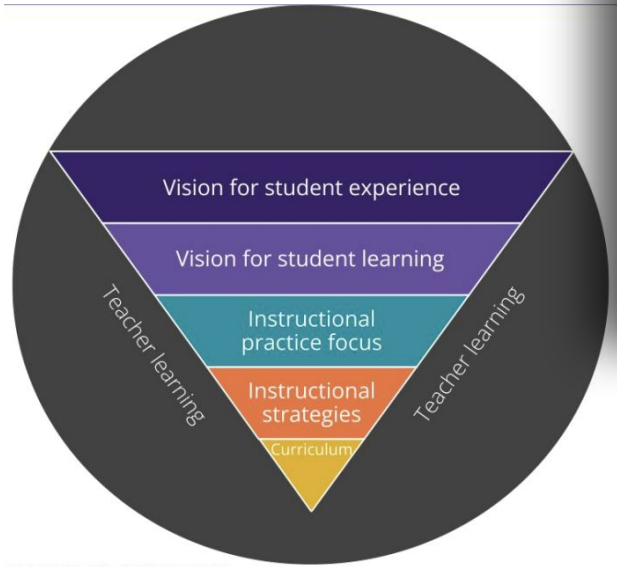
Each and every student feels connected to at least 1 trusted adult in the building. This will increase from 90% of students feeling connected to a trusted adult in our Spring 2026 Student Engagement Survey to **91% or higher on the Spring 2027 Student Engagement Survey**. This will contribute to the overall sense of belonging within the West community.

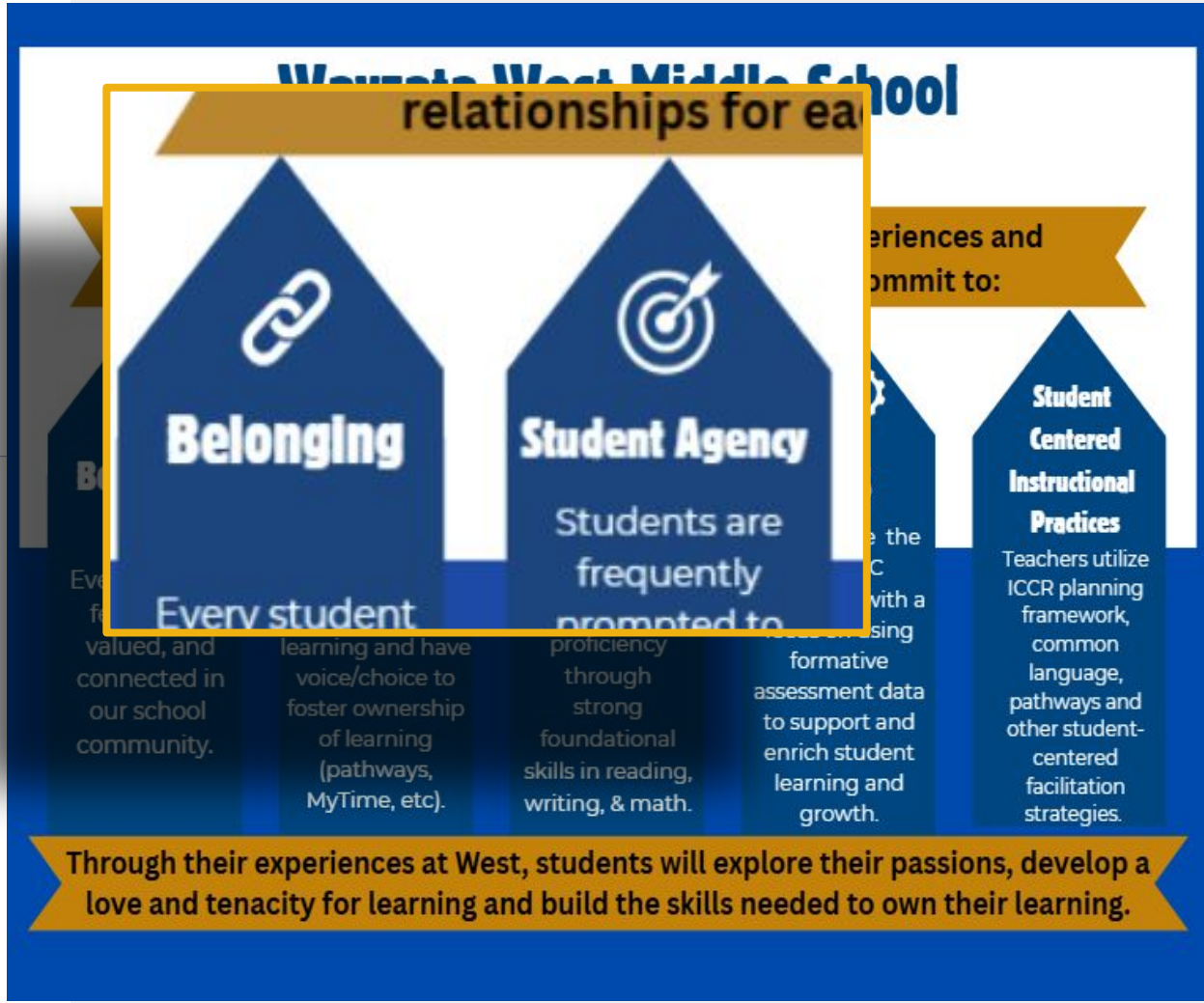


The percentage of all students in grades 6-8 West Middle School who **score as "Low Risk" or "On Target"** in the Spring FastBridge aReading test will increase from **80%** in the Spring of 2026 to **83%** in the Spring of 2027 and by sub group as follows:

a. The percentage of all students in grades 6-8 at West Middle School who scored in the **"High Risk" or "Some Risk"** range on the Fall aReading test and **demonstrate "Aggressive Growth"** from Fall-to-Spring will increase from **18%** in Spring 2026 to **30%** in Spring 2027.

WEST BUILDING GOALS:





A Call To Adventure: Why Advisory?

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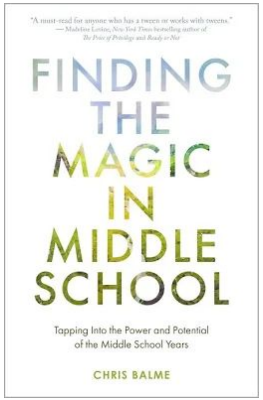
Adolescent Development

All middle schoolers wrestle with these three questions:

1. Who Am I?
2. How Do I Connect?
3. What Will I Contribute?



(from *Finding the Magic in Middle School* by Chris Balme)

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Using What We Know About Adolescents to Make Our School Better:

1. Belonging would come first
2. Teachers would be guides - less focused on content and more on conditions
3. Classes would become quests
4. **Advisory would be the heart of the school**

(from *Finding the Magic in Middle School* by Chris Balme)

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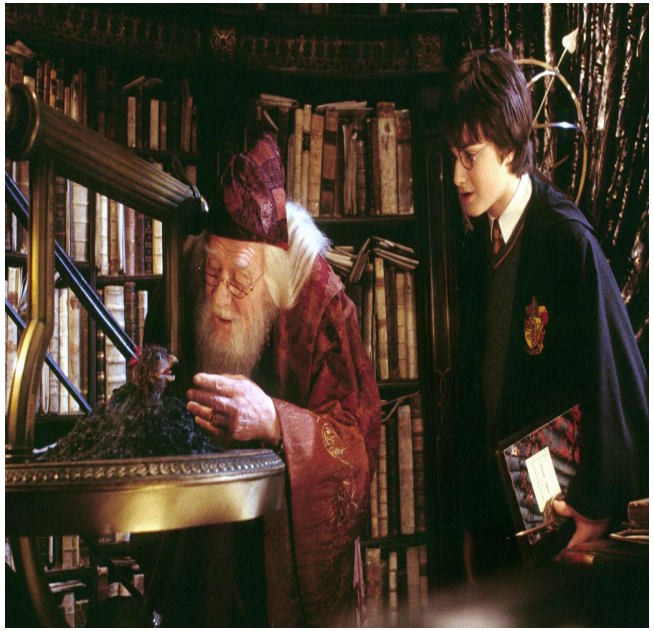
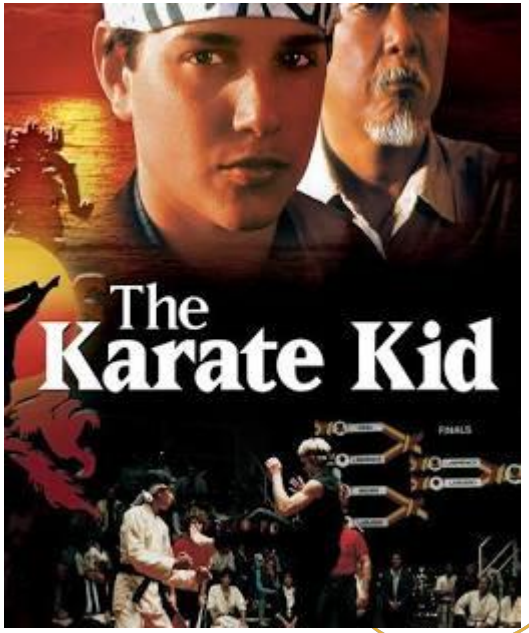
A Hero's Journey…

Think about some of the great adventure stories that you've read or watched…..







A Hero's Journey...

The story often involves a mentor that is by the side and mentoring the young hero.

If there wasn't someone by their side, it would feel like an impossible nightmare instead of an adventure.

When you have people with you, that can validate you in the hard times then we turn it to an **adventure**.

How can we be that caring adult that helps the middle school journey feel like an adventure?

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Purpose of Advisory

To create the CONDITIONS to support students as they move through the developmental stages of:

- belonging
- achievement
- authenticity

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Purpose of Advisory: Brain Science

- Neuroscience tells us the brain feels safest and relaxed when we are connected to others we trust to treat us well.

- Academic conferencing with a trusted adult advisor helps to guide learning choices, support executive functioning skills and are a piece in developing students ability to own their learning.

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Purpose of Advisory: Connection to Brain Science, Belonging and Learning

- The brain needs to be a part of a caring social community to maximize its sense of well being
- Positive relationships keep the brain's safety/threat detection system in check (helps the amygdala stay calm so the prefrontal cortex can focus on higher order thinking and learning)
- Neuroscience tells us the brain feels safest and relaxed when we are connected to others we trust to treat us well (importance of each student having at least 1 trusted adult)

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Impact of Advisory on both Belonging and Academic Achievement

- When we create conditions in a school where students have a strong sense of belonging and can be their authentic selves it primes their brain for learning and allows students to take risks in the learning process.

- Advisory is also a place we support students executive functioning skills and can help grow their skills in owning their learning. Advisory/Advisee conferencing is a key component - a trusted adult helping to guide learning choices.

Learning from Experts

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Learning from Experts

A small team of teachers attended the Association for Middle Level Education Annual conference where they had numerous sessions on middle school best practices including Advisory.

During the 2025-26 school year, the Advisory Guiding Coalition Team and the Belonging/Purposeful Community Guiding Coalition Team read the book *Finding the Magic in Middle School* by Chris Balme. That book and discussions that came out of it shaped many of the steps we are taking this year.

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Learning from Experts

With the support of the West PTO, we were able to send a small team to Chris Balme's Argonaut Advisory facilitation intensive 3 day training in New York.

- That team came back with new ideas and a new perspective that help to drive our practices at West
- Team participates in on-going virtual coaching sessions to refine facilitation skills and use to share with staff.



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Learning from Experts

Multiple visits to Southview Middle School in Edina to hear Chris Balme speak, see multi-grade advisory in action and participate in adult advisory.

In October, we got to send another small team of teachers to another of Chris' professional learning opportunities at Bethel.

Professional Learning Opportunities

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Learning Into Action

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Learning into Action

- Day in the Life - The Ideal State of Advisory
- What if play is enough
- Power of Multi Grade Advisory

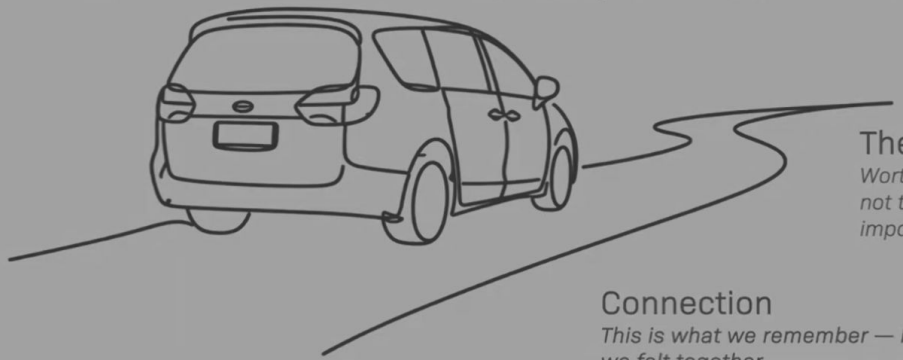
A Day in the Life - The Ideal State of Advisory

Advisory is like a road trip

A safe, reliable vehicle.
Agreements, rituals, consistent use of time.

The Driver (You)
You presence is essential, but also not what they're focused on.

The Fuel
Their interest in each other. The desire to see, and be seen.



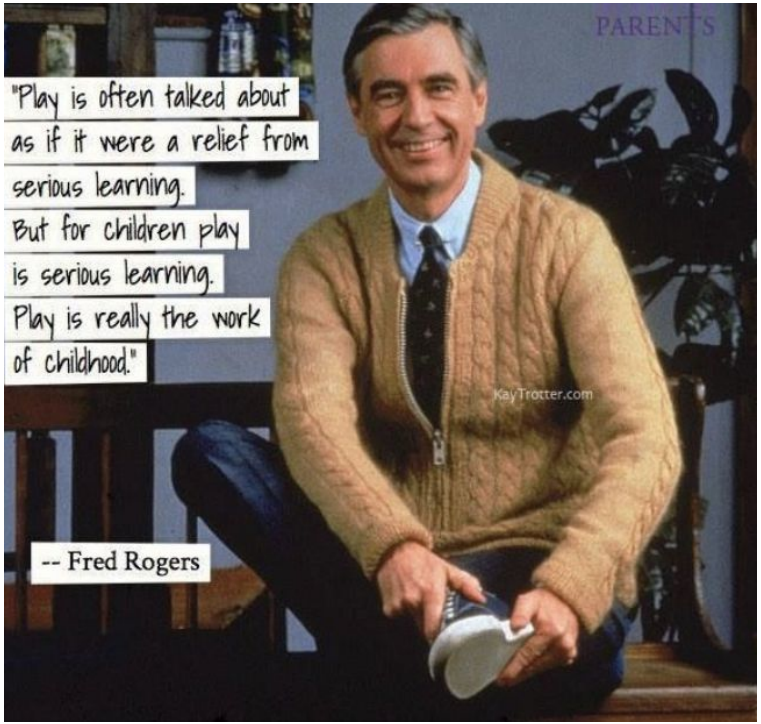
The Sights (Topics)
Worthy and often interesting — but not the most memorable or important part.

Connection
This is what we remember — how we felt together.

Student Perspective

How has Advisory helped you feel connected at school?

What if Play is Enough?



Advisory Guiding Coalition

Adult Advisory

<u>FOCUS:</u>

Connecting through **play**

Modeling and practicing positive risk taking and challenge by choice.

Adult Advisory

- Each licensed staff is a part of an Adult Advisory that meets once a month.
- During Adult Advisory we grow in our facilitation skills by participating in many of the activities our students will participate in that month.
- Also has been an amazing way to grow purposeful community among our staff.



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Student Perspective

What is a favorite way you have connected through “play” in advisory this year?

Sample Advisory Activity

Finger Grab

3, 2, 1, Go!

1. Set Up:
   a. Stand and tighten the circle.
   b. Hold out left to partner on left. Put pointer finger in that person's palm.
   c. Hold out palm on right. Partner on right puts pointer finger in your palm.
2. When you hear "Go" after countdown. At the same time, try to lift your pointer finger and grab the pointer finger of partner on the right
   a. Were you able to grab the finger or not have your finger grabbed?
3. Continue until desired.



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Speed Circle

Have your group sit or stand in a circle with a token to pass around. Ask for a volunteer to start with the token. Give that individual a topic that they need to name 5 items from before the token gets passed all the way around the circle. You can increase the number from 5 to increase the challenge.

Category topic ideas: teachers you have currently, teachers from last year, breakfast cereals, brands of shoes, grocery stores, NBA teams, names of restaurants, students from your grade not in this room, etc…

The Power of Multi-Grade Advisory



Strengthen School Community for students and teachers

Built in Mentorship and Leadership

Longitudinal Relationships and Continuity

Broader Social Perspectives

Student Perspective

Share a connection you have made with someone in another grade level.

Advisory is like a road trip

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This is what we remember — how we felt together.

Next Steps: *On the Road again…*

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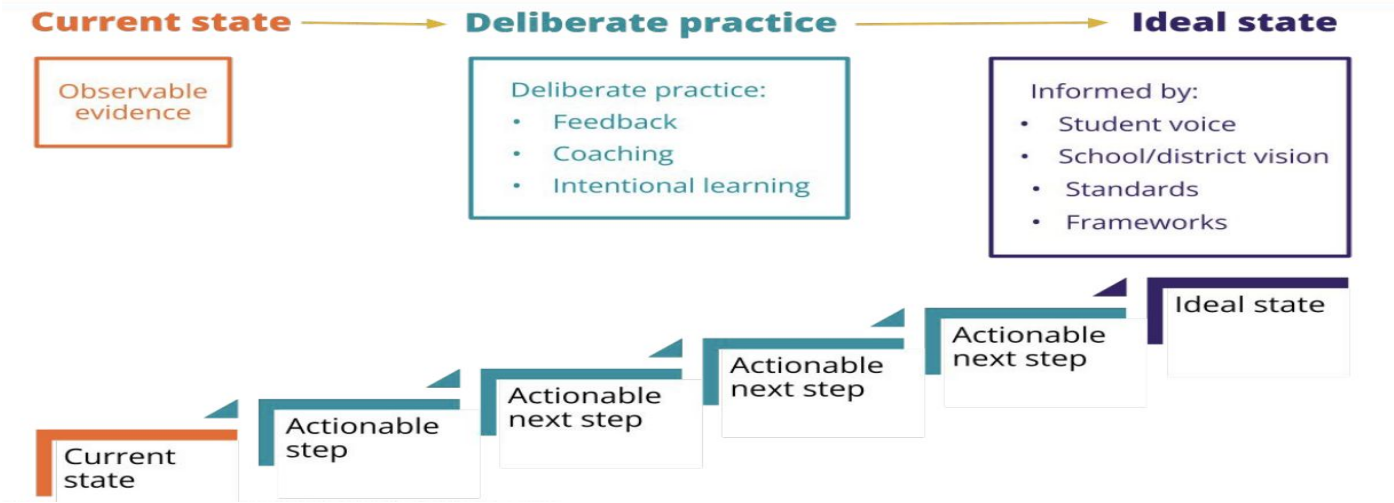
Better Equipped for the Next Road Trip:

How can we learn and grow towards the Ideal State

- Gather information from this year's PLAY
- Identify barriers that need to be removed
- Identify areas to build from and strengthen

West Advisory Guiding Coalition

- Advisory Guiding Coalition is continually getting feedback on what our current state of Advisory practices are and collaborating on our next actionable steps to work toward our ideal state.



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Student Perspective

What has been a highlight of Advisory for your this year?

What's something you want the adults to know as we plan the next "road trips"?