

What Do Advisory Committees Do?

According to Chapter 74 Regulations, it is the mission of program advisory committees to: *advise, assist and support the department head, program manager, guidance personnel and other school officials in order to improve planning, operation and evaluation [of the] program area.*

In general, advisory committees exist to keep vocational-technical education in tune with occupational trends. They do this in a variety of ways:

My committee has been very involved with the education of the students: reviewing the courses; suggesting text-books, jobs, and equipment that would best prepare the students for the jobs in industry in our area. The staff has been very receptive and expects us to help improve the program.

- by advising on equipment and facility needs;
- by advising on curriculum and instructional methods;
- by helping to recruit, guide, and advise vocational-technical students;
- by advocating for vocational-technical education with industry and the community; and
- by helping administrators to plan and evaluate vocational-technical programs.

This chapter offers a “smorgasbord” of activities that might be undertaken by program and general advisory committees for vocational-technical education. The examples provided are actual accomplishments of advisory committees in Massachusetts. Some are the result of years of discussion and preparation by the advisory committee, working with school personnel; others required only a single meeting and recommendation to school administrators or the school committee. Some are small-scale changes that improve a single aspect of a vocational-technical program; others are dramatic alterations that may affect the overall operation of the school.

The important point is that the critical eyes, creative imaginations, and combined strength of a good advisory committee can really make things happen. The examples provided in this chapter are intended simply to generate ideas for ways to use your advisory committees for greatest benefit to your school.

provide advice on new technology

Advisory committees review existing equipment, facilities, and resources. The tour of the shop is a highlight of the program advisory committee meeting. Advisors generally consider how closely the school's equipment matches the equipment used in industry: What is obsolete? What is still needed? Is the shop adequately stocked? Are there sufficient materials for all students in the program? The shop tour may generate a series of grant applications and donations that can turn a shop around in relatively short order.

The physical layout of the shop may also be a target for advisor comment.

In at least two schools, advisory committees recommended moving the auto-body instructor's desk to a raised platform to give the teacher a better view of the entire shop area.

Advisors also consider safety issues, applying their own safety standards (or those promulgated by the industry, or by state or federal agencies) to the school's shop area.

In a number of schools, advisors have recommended installing spray booths to maintain air-quality standards in auto-body shops.

One program advisor offered the use of company facilities to test the oil in a school's machine shop for PCBs.

Advisory committees recommend new equipment. Advisors help schools get the best equipment for their needs at reasonable cost. Not only might they suggest purchasing a generic type of equipment – for example, Computer-Assisted Design (CAD) systems for drafting programs or Computerized Numerical Control (CNC) for machine shops – but they often help the instructional staff select from the different products and models available. Advisors may attend several ad hoc meetings to review sales brochures, observe vendors' demonstrations, and compare quotes.

Advisory committee members in one school are researching the comparative advantages of different configurations of computer equipment for a new course in desktop publishing.

One school obtained eight CNC stations instead of three for its machine shop when advisors recommended purchasing special training models rather than full-scale industrial equipment.

Advisors in one school rejected all proposals that were submitted for a new CAD system, and reissued the solicitation with new requirements. As a result, the school acquired a far more powerful system at comparable cost.

Vocational-technical administrators in Massachusetts generally concur that some demonstration of advisory committee support is necessary to procure funds for new equipment. Some schools require that program advisors sign off on all grant applications or purchase requisitions; others simply attach minutes of the committees' meetings confirming the need for new equipment. Advisors may also be asked to attend school committee meetings to support the school's request for funds.

Advisory committees donate materials, equipment, and services to vocational-technical programs. If the advisors themselves cannot supply a certain item, they may direct the school to someone who can. Sometimes advisors impose upon their colleagues to donate the needed supplies. Regardless of the source, schools get a better-stocked shop, and the donor businesses may get a welcome tax benefit.

One marine technology program received in donations \$40,000 of sandpaper, seven engines, and five boats.

Some dental assistant students learn theory in school and practice their skills in laboratory facilities donated by advisory committee members.

Advisory committees help schools maintain their libraries of visual aids, magazines, and books. Advisors have provided schools with updated parts catalogs and with published regulations (e.g., for hazardous waste disposal). With the advent of inexpensive videotape equipment, advisors have contributed to comprehensive occupational libraries in the schools.

Car dealers have loaned manufacturers' training videos to automotive technology shops; carpentry businesses have donated videos that demonstrate highly specialized woodworking techniques.

help update
and refine
the curriculum

Advisory committees help to develop educational objectives. Sometimes an outside perspective offers new insights on programs that may seem stagnant or unable to keep pace with industry trends. Fresh ideas can help vocational-technical administrators and instructors to place their programs in context and develop new approaches that are more in tune with contemporary expectations.

Advisory committees help to validate task/competency listings for an occupation. These listings provide the foundation for the development of a competency-based vocational-technical program curriculum.

Electronics programs attract students who are interested in repair work as well as students who aspire to be engineers. Drafting programs attract students who want to be machine draftspersons as well as students who want to be architects. Advisors can help vocational-technical administrators decide whether to offer a two-track program, limit enrollment to one or the other type of student, or otherwise solve this dilemma.

One school reconsidered its approach to teaching computer-assisted drafting when the program advisory committee identified what students needed to know. They added a third year to the program to incorporate CAD/CAM while retaining their excellent drafting program.

We seem to get a lot of ideas out in the open that are used by the teachers in their classes and their advisements. The committee serves to provide the instructors with a direct link to the industry environment they are teaching.

Advisory committees share their expertise on new and developing areas. Change is a constant in the world of vocational-technical education, and advisors can help schools keep pace with the times. They suggest new program areas – such as wastewater treatment or medical office management. And they identify emerging trends in traditional areas – unibody auto construction, computer-assisted drafting, short-order food preparation.

To help a school expand its electronics program, one advisory committee researched local trends in robotics and computer/VCR repair. As a result of the advisory committee's work, the school focused its expansion efforts on computer and video equipment repair.

Advisory committees review, evaluate, and advise on the technical content of course materials. Schools have found advisors' input to be helpful in determining whether texts need to be updated or supplemented. Although advisors generally do not select course materials, they may identify occupation-related manuals or catalogs, for example, that are used in their own shops and would be equally applicable for vocational-technical training shops.

One distributive education advisory committee observed that the texts in use were outdated. The teacher pre-selected three new texts and asked the advisors to critique them in view of their applicability to actual retailing practice.

Members of a program advisory committee in licensed practical nursing surveyed local hospitals to ascertain which procedures were assigned to LPNs. Their findings were used to enrich the curriculum.

Advisory committees advise on the methods of instruction most appropriate for course content. Conventional-technical instructors welcome suggestions that help to hold student interest while advancing the concepts and skills required in the course. Although few advisors have been trained to be teachers, many are in a position to offer unique perspectives from on-the-job training that occurs in their business.

The advisory committee for one school's machine shop met every three weeks one summer to help the school design a project-oriented course. They worked closely with the teachers to analyze the desired skill levels for a competency-based approach to instruction.

When a student advisor commented that instructional time in the quantity food occupations program seemed monotonous, the advisory committee recommended changing the stations more often.

The advisory committee at one school helped to procure a federal grant supporting an aide to work specifically with the special-needs students.

Advisory committees help schools to identify courses needed to meet entry-level job requirements. Occupations that are unionized or regulated by the state or industry associations place special emphasis on knowledge of theory and skills required to enter the work force. Advisors representing these occupations can help vocational-technical schools to tailor their programs to ensure that graduates are prepared. Advisory committees may also suggest ways for schools to use existing facilities and personnel to retrain displaced workers for new occupations.

Advisory committees advise on the extent to which basic skills and work attitudes should be taught. Advisors in the technical shops (e.g., machine shop, electronics, and drafting), for example, have pointed to the need for better preparation in math and computer skills. Some advisors see a need for improved communication skills. And many advisors, across all program areas, pay attention to the importance of good work attitudes.*

*Recent research in Massachusetts indicates a very high level of satisfaction on the part of employers for the work habits and work attitudes of Chapter 74 program completers.

Because a number of advisory committee members expressed dissatisfaction with the students' work habits, one distributive education teacher instituted a rating chart to record each student's attendance, punctuality, and grads. These charts are now used when selecting students for co-op placements.

Advisory committee members serve as, or arrange for, guest speakers or substitute teachers. Some advisors have arranged for manufacturers to take their displays to the schools. One drafting advisor sponsors special workshops for students on the use of drafting film. A chef advisor demonstrates ice sculpture.

One school's general advisory committee noted that vocational-technical programs sometimes experienced difficulty in finding quality substitute teachers. The committee's research yielded a resource list for the school to consult when substitutes are needed.

Advisory committees bring special projects to the school. Many schools have initiated successful house-building projects, thanks largely to input from several advisory committees: electrical, plumbing, and carpentry. Advisors to auto-body repair shops locate salvage vehicles for students to work on. Carpentry advisory committees devise blueprint projects for students and critique the results. Machine shop committees likewise initiate competitive projects for students and award prizes to the winners.

The drafting advisory committee at one school asked students to submit drawings for a special project. One drawing, to be selected by the advisory committee, was then to be given to the machine shop students to actually make the tool.

Merchandising students at one school wanted to do a marketing survey for the school store. Two advisory committee members helped to develop a survey instrument and analyze the results. One finding of the survey was that customers preferred to use credit cards for purchases at the store.

Advisory committees contribute to the professional development of instructional staff. By underwriting teachers' memberships in industry and trade associations, advisory committees help teachers gain access to technology updates and entrée to colleagues in the field. The efforts of advisors enable teachers to attend conferences or workshops to upgrade their skills and sometimes advisors sponsor

their own tours and workshops for teachers. Moreover, advisors often provide summer employment for teachers to introduce them to technology used in the field and to help sharpen their skills.

Advisors for a graphic arts program instructed teachers in the use of mechanized film processing and a color lab for color separation. They also helped the school obtain more than \$250,000 worth of sophisticated equipment, including a color scanner.

assist in recruiting and placing students

Advisory committees help “sell” vocational-technical education to students. Perhaps one of the most important functions of a program advisor is serving as a role model for students who are considering entering the occupation. This function is most evident when recruiting students for nontraditional occupations and when recruiting special-needs students or academically disadvantaged students.

Advisors frequently speak at assemblies for eighth-graders to introduce them to vocational-technical education and work opportunities. They also give presentations for exploratory classes. Some schools have asked their advisors to publicize employment potential in slide or film presentations developed for recruitment purposes.

Advisory committees arrange for occupationally related field trips and other activities. Advisors often open their plants for class tours or observations of the actual operation of a business. Sometimes they allow brief hands-on demonstrations to give students a glimpse of how it would be to do this kind of work.

One program advisor has arranged for two drafting students to spend half a day each week “shadowing” a draftsperson or designer at the large graphics firm where the advisor works.

Advisory committees inform the school of opportunities to place students in full- or part-time jobs or co-op positions. Vocational-technical students welcome the chance to try out their new skills and make some money while still in school; when they graduate, they want jobs related to their training. Advisors are aware of job openings, both in their own shops and in those of their colleagues, and can pass this information on to the school’s instructional and placement staff. They can also advise teachers and students of the pay scale to expect upon graduation.

One union member of an advisory committee see to it that at least one student from the school gets an electrician’s apprenticeship position each year.

Advisory committees inform employers of the availability of trained vocational-technical students. People with no direct link to vocational-technical schools are often totally unaware of the talent that may be available. Helping to publicize the school in this way may, in turn, generate donations and other forms of support and, of course, enlarge the membership of advisory committees.

Advisory committees support student vocational-technical organizations (such as DECA and VICA). Advisors serve as judges for competitions and often donate scholarships, awards, or prizes to the top students. Winning a complete tool set can be a valuable incentive for vocational-technical students looking for their first job after graduation.

Advisory committees review the school's career guidance policies and activities. Advisors help vocational-technical personnel assess the larger picture of employment opportunities in their community – whether for traditional occupations, special populations, or emerging occupational areas.

General advisory committee members at one school observed that some students in summer jobs often found working so lucrative that they chose not to return to school to finish their program. This finding initiated a study of ways to strengthen the co-op program so that students could “earn while they learn.”

Another general advisory committee recommended expanding the number of occupational areas in the exploratory program from six to nine.

generate
positive public
relations

Advisory committees help acquaint the community with the needs of vocational-technical education. Advisors can be the school's most effective spokespersons with political groups – not only the school committee, but planning boards as well. The views of prominent business leaders tend to carry considerable weight with these policymakers.

One school, whose agricultural program had thrived over many years, was threatened by the city's plan to take over the land for development. Through the combined efforts of the general advisory committee, the school was able to keep its land and its agricultural program.

Advisors speak to trade or community organizations about their work with vocational-technical programs. Sometimes they place articles in their company or trade newsletters. These public relations activities, in turn, may initiate stories in

local print and broadcast media that reflect favorably on both the school and the advisors themselves.

Advisory committees have arranged for student exhibits at local shopping malls, and they have themselves appeared to speak about the relationship between vocational-technical schools and the private sector.

Advisory committees seek legislative support for vocational-technical programs. Advisors who are community leaders may wield clout with state or federal legislators, and they may be able to speak on behalf of the needs of vocational-technical education generally, or of particular schools.

An advertising executive who is a member of one school's merchandising advisory committee initiated a letter campaign to state legislators to protest funding cutbacks in vocational-technical education.

assist with program planning and evaluation

Advisory committees help vocational-technical schools plan and implement new programs. As noted above, advisors sometimes generate ideas for new vocational-technical programs. In addition, advisors can also be closely involved in the actual planning and implementation of those programs.

Several general advisory committee members served as a Blue Ribbon Commission to assess the city's need for a new vocational-technical school. Now that the city has agreed to build a new school, advisory committee members are working with instructors to lay out their shops and identify equipment needs.

Advisory committees help schools set priorities for budgetary expenditures. When resources are limited, advisors help vocational-technical administrators use their available resources to maximum advantage. Many schools in Massachusetts relied heavily on the recommendations of their advisors, for example, when Proposition 2½ forced painful decisions about cutting back on or eliminating programs.

Advisory committees advise schools on trends in the local job market. Advisors from business and industry are in an ideal position to foresee where their own industries are headed and how advances in technology will affect the labor market. Vocational-technical programs can thus capitalize on advisors' insights and knowledge by preparing for shifts in demand for certain types of workers.

One school initiated an assembly program targeted to special-needs students, based on an advisor's observation of the great need for trained and reliable assemblers.

Advisory committees help schools evaluate the quality of their vocational-technical programs. Assessing how well vocational-technical programs are preparing students to enter the job market can take several forms with advisors assisting in various ways. For example, schools or private contractors may undertake follow-up surveys of graduates and employers to ascertain what proportion of students remain in their field upon graduation, and to measure employers satisfaction with the quality of training. Often advisors assist with these surveys by suggesting additional questions, proposing ways to encourage cooperation with employers, or reviewing survey results and recommending program changes accordingly.

At several schools, advisors have been assessing whether the names of programs actually fit the course content. For example, Auto Body Repair might be more aptly described as Vehicle Collision Technology, since students are prepared to work on vehicles other than cars. One advisory committee is considering alternative names for the drafting program because the admissions directors of technical colleges have expressed surprise at the program's level of sophistication.

Some advisors have suggested close monitoring of co-op placements to identify and close any gaps between the school's training and the needs of employers; with early detection of problems, a school can thus modify a program quickly to benefit current enrollees. And still other advisors assist by serving as on-site evaluators for Chapter 74 evaluations conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Education.