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Freshman homeroom could be eliminated at Brookline High

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Brookline -

Homeroom may soon be a foreign concept to Brookline High School freshmen.

A new 21st Century Fund initiative, called the Ithaca Project, calls for ninth-grade homeroom to be replaced with advisory groups, or small communities of 12 freshmen and one teacher. Introduced this past week to the School Committee by Headmaster Robert Weintraub, the Ithaca project's two main goals are to help students establish a strong relationship with at least one adult during their high school years, and allow students to develop and express strong interests while at BHS.

In response to the latter goal, the project's second component is the Senior Project, an alternative to the senior paper, which involves the social studies, English and performing arts departments. The project, estimated to cost a little more than \$95,000 in its first year and close to \$110,000 in its second year, would be funded by the 21st Century Fund, a 10-year-old nonprofit that supports innovative projects for Brookline High students and teachers.

"I'm looking forward to the whole thing," said Weintraub at the June 12 School Committee meeting. "The hope is that in the senior exit survey, 95 percent of kids will say they established a strong relationship [with an adult] at Brookline High School. It's another way to provide more opportunities for that to happen."

If the School Committee approves the project at their next meeting, homeroom could be replaced as soon as this September. The advisory groups would meet each Tuesday and be driven by a set curriculum, with students attending assemblies and having group discussions designed to integrate them into the high school and familiarize them with its culture.

One activity is "Tell Your Story," where students talk about their lives, allowing freshmen to learn about their peers. The groups would reflect the diversity of the high school and have, among other things, specific numbers of Asian students, black students, white students, high-achieving and low-achieving students, according to Weintraub. For some activities, two advisory groups will merge, with two teachers for 24 students.

Yet one School Committee member expressed some doubt regarding the idea.

“I’m not clear how it’s meant to happen, this relationship with one adult,” Helen Charlupski said. “My sense was they are supposed to connect with almost anyone in the high school.”

Weintraub said that according to senior exit surveys, around 85 percent of seniors report making a connection with an adult during their four years at Brookline High. He said he wanted to address the 15 percent who said they didn’t forge a strong relationship.

The Senior Project will address a more academic facet of high school life. For the program, seniors will conduct a presentation, in addition to a written component, showing their understanding of the topic they researched. Approximately 40 students are signed up to take the class next year in lieu of writing the 10-page senior paper, which is a graduation requirement for all students. The students will all take the same English class and then choose to take either a social studies or performing arts seminar.

School Committee Chairman Henry Warren said he was very supportive of the project. Warren, father to two Brookline High alums who wrote senior papers, said changing things around and doing new school projects might recharge students’ and teachers’ interest in a subject.

“I’m an enthusiastic backer of these kind of innovative programs,” Warren said. “I think it helps keep the teachers engaged and it does the same for students. I think if things have been a tradition for 40 years, they may sort of invite complacency and root behavior and maybe that’s what the senior paper has kind of reached ... so I think the innovations that is funded by 21st Century Fund are enriching for both faculty and students.”

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