“Today is consultancy day,” Ms. Renato said to her advisory class of 19 Western Preparatory Academy students as they settled into their seats. “We’re going to do a quick go-around. What are you working on? Please take out your planners.” As students took out their school-issued planning calendars, books, and written work, each student in the rectangle-shaped desk arrangement took a turn saying what work they would do. Since all of Ms. Renato’s advisees had the same instructors, many mentioned the same English assignment. “What stage are you at?,” Ms. Renato asked the group. “Typing.” “Pictures.” “Reading.” “Revising.” When each student had shared an update, Ms. Renato directed the class to begin working on their tasks, and handed out computers to students who had requested them. “Remember, this is individual work time,” she tells the group. She met in the hallway with a student who had arrived late to class, brought to the door by one of Western’s paraprofessional staff members who handled school discipline. Occasionally, Ms. Renato would lean into the doorway to remind students to stay on task.

A few weeks later, I returned Ms. Renato’s advisory to find her advisees seated in a loosely arranged circle, taking turns reading aloud from a newspaper article about the merger between Western and another of Strive Public Schools’ charter schools. Wallace, a 10th-grade student, facilitated the group. He read the norms for Socratic seminar at Western, in which students discussed and explored a topic selected by the advisor (Copeland, 2005, describes Socratic seminar methods in great detail), and explained the activity’s next steps. Students then discussed the experience of their schools merger, guided by the questions Wallace occasionally posed (“Did students from the two schools have stereotypes of each other at the beginning of the year?”). Ms. Renato stepped in when multiple students spoke at once or to give clarification about the activity. As the discussion continued, she
shared with me the written plan she had created for it. It included discussion objectives, a warm-up activity, links to the material to be discussed, explicit questions that framed the discussion, and guidelines for advisors on structuring the activity itself (for example, “YOU MUST DEBRIEF!!! Make sure that you end the seminar early enough to do a debrief session on what was said and how the seminar went.”). On the same day, I visited two other advisory classes led by members of Ms. Renato’s teaching team. Each advisor used and followed the same written plan.

Martin Luther King Academy’s 11th-grade advisory curriculum guided Ms. Li’s work with her advisory class. Yet she told me she felt like she wasn’t reaching the advisees who seemed to need her support, including students who ran behind on credits and missed classes frequently, others who expressed interest in attending college, and others in the midst of personal difficulties. To begin an advisory class in December, she read school announcements as directed by the advisory curriculum. “You’re talking but no one’s listening,” Kim said loudly (and accurately) as Ms. Li read announcements for 12 minutes. Ms. Li concluded with a final announcement as students continued to enter and leave her classroom: “If any of you are interested in transferring to another high school, see the guidance counselor. The deadline is January 15. If you don’t make the change before then, you are pretty much stuck here for the rest of the year.” Ms. Li then introduced a quiz that checked students’ knowledge of King’s previous words of the week (known by the acronym “WOW”), in which advisors introduced, defined, and then led brief activities about vocabulary words. “Some of you are down to sixty-something on your WOW quizzes,” Ms. Li said as she passed out quizzes, which contained write-in items such as follows: “To speak out against, to condemn. Starts with the letter D.” As students completed the quiz, 25 minutes after advisory class had begun, Ms. Li transitioned the group to work on their “brag sheets,” in which they wrote about different skills, accomplishments, and interests in preparation for writing resumes. After introducing the activity, she circulated around the room, working with individual students. I excused myself, and briefly joined Ms. Byrd’s 11th-grade advisory down the hall. Three students worked independently while others talked quietly or listened to music on headphones. “We’re all done with the activities for today,” Ms. Byrd told me, waving me into the room. “I gave them an extra worksheet with information on the world’s population, and they are on their own now.”

Just as Ms. Byrd’s advisory class was on its own after quickly completing its curricular activities, Ms. Li found herself on her own to make her school’s curriculum work for her students. By contrast, Ms. Renato and her teaching team colleagues engaged in more structured activities that came with clear guidance, sufficient materials, and a teaching team