

Succeeding together at the Met

by What Kids Can Do with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

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SUSTAINED RELATIONSHIPS



Photos by Cal Wolk

[Click here for more student and staff commentary](#)

“This year, every year, I go through this low point...related to out of school issues. And I talked to my mentor about it—I don’t want it to affect my school things, because I know it can happen and I’ll probably give up and I don’t want that to happen. My mentor is there for me a lot. If I didn’t have him, I don’t know. My mentor, my advisor and me. The team...keeps the dream together.” — Maya

“Now, I find it easier to speak to my parents. Before, I never talked to them... I hated to talk to them, especially anything about school. It was like the worst thing you could do, to say something back. When I’d get mad, my mouth starts to go, I don’t even realize what I say—bad things. Since I was always holding it in, now it feels good to release all that. So now I’m like, wow, I can talk. I can take a stand now, especially at my house.” — Freddie

Relationships undergird all learning at The Met. Keeping adults and other students at bay is not an option. Met students must build close relationships with an advisor, community mentors, and other Met faculty, if they are to fulfill their personal learning plans. They must also commit to an advisory group made up of peers, plus substantial give-and-take with the larger school community. Perhaps hardest of all, The Met requires that its adolescent students accept their parents as learning “partners.” The personal connections that result are at once trusting and complex. “It’s a lot harder here,” explains one Met student. “The teachers...they see all of your strong points, all your weak points, everything.”

Below, we describe the core elements of these sustained, nested relationships. We link them to student work and other artifacts that illustrate how these elements support and challenge students.

ADVISORS

Teachers at The Met are known as advisors, and they facilitate the learning of the 14 students (all in the same grade) in their advisory group. They help students create learning plans, identify interests, find internships, develop projects, and manage their time. They also work closely with their advisees' mentors, meeting monthly at the job site and providing back at school whatever instruction or support students need to complete their internships. Since advisors stay with the same students until they graduate, teaching applicants must make a four-year commitment to the school. The resulting advisor-student bond runs deep.

[Click here](#) for an example of advisor-to-student reflections.

MENTORS

Mentors are the adults who guide and coach students in their community internships ("Learning Through Internships" or LTIs). As part of the student's learning team, along with the advisor and parent/guardian, the mentor helps students develop LTI projects that have real consequence and value—to the student, mentor, and workplace. The mentor also gives regular feedback to the advisor, participates in the student's exhibition of project work, and evaluates the student's job performance and learning. Mentors stand as living examples of career possibilities and as role models of contributing community members.

[Click here](#) for excerpts from senior Victoria Stilwell's book *Mentors*.

ADVISORIES

For Met students, advisories—advisors and their 14 students—are home base, the close-knit unit where students and faculty gather for an hour each morning to launch their day and where they return every afternoon for a half-hour before the day ends. Each advisory follows its own script, weaving together time for students to fill out daily planners or write in their journals; to discuss a common reading or debate current events; to plan a trip or special event; and to share high and low points with the group, or give or receive feedback on work in progress. Advisories give Met students a place to practice new skills and develop their identities with a safety net.

[Click here](#) for a glimpse at one day in the life of an advisory group.

PARENTS

Viewing parents as essential "learning partners," The Met asks much of parents, recognizing they have much to give. All parents sign a contract with the school, agreeing to attend quarterly learning plan meetings and exhibitions, activities for which The Met offers training nights for parents. A buddy program matches new parents with veterans. Parents, teachers, students, and siblings frequently gather on campus for shared dinners and videos. The Met, as it likes to say, enrolls families, not just students. For students, this conviction poses a formidable adolescent challenge: accepting parents and guardians as valued partners in their learning.

[Click here](#) for a diagram of parent-student relationships at The Met.

THE SCHOOL AS FAMILY

The Met's small size, intimate advisory system, and insistence on parent participation go far towards making the school feel like a family. Several features extend these connections. Through performances and presentations, students engage one another at a daily morning gathering appropriately called Pick-Me-Up. Eleventh and twelfth graders mentor freshmen and sophomores. Students attend exhibitions by classmates, where they join the audience in providing both positive and critical feedback. Students of all ages crowd graduation, and each spring Met graduates return to school as guests of honor, exchanging stories with current students, advisors, and mentors who continue to wish them well.

[Click here](#) for examples of student projects that “give back” to the school community.

SUSTAINED RELATIONSHIPS | CLIPBOARD

Sources:

[1] “Forty-Three Valedictorians: Graduates of The Met Talk about Their Learning” by Adria Steinberg (Brown Lab, 2000)

[2] *Learning Journeys* and *The Learning Cycle* (Met videos, 2000)

[3] *One Kid at a Time* by Eliot Levine (Teachers College Press, 2002).

On advisors and teachers

Student: I like The Met, because you have a close relationship with your teachers. It's not like a regular school where I'm confused but I don't say nothing 'cause I don't like my teacher. I procrastinate a lot, and when I had to write this essay for an Outward Bound scholarship, my teacher was like “You're *not* putting this one off. It's too important. You're coming over my house, and you're writing it.” And I stayed at her house until eight o'clock that night and got it done. Then when I got the scholarship, she took me shopping and paid for my boots, because my mother didn't have the money. My mother paid her back later. Stuff like that. Like I used to have a big, big attitude about adults trying to have authority over me. I'm getting better, but last year she was the only one who could calm me down and get me to apologize. She knows how I am, and if she knows that I'm *too* upset, then she'll just leave me alone and let me work by myself. [3]

Maya: Usually other high schools, they don't really bother with you. Since it's so big, they don't care... These teachers, they get personal with you—not too personal—but they know how you are, they get down to it.

After describing how often she was suspended for fighting in her middle school, Maya explained how and why she changed:

Here, I haven't been into a fight yet. I was going to get into a lot of fights, but Doc [the students' nickname for co-director Dennis Littky] sits you down and talks to you. He makes you laugh, makes you understand your problems. At other schools, it's just, “you're suspended, goodbye!” I'm changing the way I do my work, the way I act towards people... Now, I just breathe first, think about it, and go talk to someone here. When you want to fight, you don't think about why, you just want to fight the person. When they sit you down and you talk about it, you understand that you shouldn't go into that kind of stuff. [1]

Priscilla: Staying with the same advisor for four years is the highlight of The Met. You learn to trust that person. [2]

On mentors

Freddie: Manny is like another advisor, someone who coaches me to do what I need to do, shows me the ropes, how to present myself to people. He shows me the grown-up world, the business world. I can tell he's not a teacher, but I learn a lot from him. He has very good advice, so I take that and that helps me out. [1]

Maya: This year, every year, I go through this low point, but that's also related to out of school issues and that's what kind of affects you at school. And I talked to my mentor about it. I don't want it to affect my school things, because I know it can happen, and I'll probably give up, and I don't want that to happen. My mentor is there for me a lot. If I didn't have him, I don't know. My mentor, my advisor, and me. The team... keeps the dream together. [1]

On advisories

Nadia: [My advisory] was essential to my success here, how I've done well. It's essential to have these people who are like your family. To go back to whenever things are not going well in your internships or whatever. We've laughed, we've cried, we've argued. It's just been so great, because we're able to understand each other so well that it's just amazing.

It's funny, because now we are all talking about the advisory. Now it's like, "wow, it's been a great thing." It was there, and we didn't realize what a great thing it was that we had 13 people we were so close to—other people who could help us with our work and could understand what we were going through and always be there to talk about anything. We've had our fun times and our fights [but] we always seemed to find the time where we could relate and talk about stuff.

I think that being in my advisory has changed some of my perspectives as a person, because now I think I'm more open to different people, different views, different perspectives on stuff... We've come together and understood each other, but it hasn't been easy. It wasn't impossible, because we all made it, and we were all able to relate to one another in many different areas, not just schoolwork. [1]

On talking to parents

Freddie: Now I find it easier to speak to my parents. Before, I never talked to them... I hated to talk to them, especially anything about school. It was like the worst thing you could do, to say something back. When I'd get mad, my mouth starts to go, I don't even realize what I say—bad things. Since I was always holding it in, now it feels good to release all that. So now I'm like, wow, I can talk. I can take a stand now, especially at my house. I have voice now. It's real good. [1]

Leah: My conferences in my old school, those were always bad. "Well, Leah's not doing this and this." I used to never tell my parents anything about school... They'd say, "How 's school?" and I'd say, "fine," because I really didn't want to talk about it, because I hated it. Now I talk about school a lot. [1]

Priscilla: My family's more involved in the school. At the same time, that could be bad, because they always, always know where you're at and what you're doing. But, you know, my family feels very—they can trust my teachers, they can come in anytime and speak to the principal, you know, something that you don't see very often. [2]

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1.0 Advisor-to-student reflection

In the week leading up to graduation, Met seniors and their advisors publicly share reflections on their four-year relationship, tracing the highs, lows, and points in between. For students, this is part of their valedictory speech. In the excerpt below, advisor Kristin Waugh Hempel talks about Marco, one of her 13 advisees. (June '02)

Marco, the man of the hour. You have achieved what no principal of your middle school thought was possible: not only have you graduated from high school, but you are class valedictorian! You should go show them your pin.

I am going to miss you next year, Marco. There won't be anyone whispering "5-0, 5-0" as I walk into a classroom, no one stealing people's notebooks and pens just for the fun of it, no one slapping people upside the head, no one grabbing papers out of my hands and dropping them on the floor just to make us smile, no one calling Javier to sing "Kristin is stupid" when you want my attention. You are a jokester, Marco, and The Met will be a few laughs -- and groans -- and bruises -- short once you walk across that stage.

But as much as you've done your best to harass the heck out of all of us, to make us pull at our hair and roll our eyes, you've also given back to the community in real and important ways. Whether it was cleaning up just because you thought the place looked a mess, or shadowing Charlie [the principal] and making others "Get back to work," or bringing students to your LTI to share with them the things that have impressed you so deeply, you've shown us all how much you respect and care for this school.

It wasn't always that way. It took a little while for The Met to grow on you. I remember our conversations freshman year and your insistence that you didn't believe in respect, saying that it was impossible to trust people and so instead you were going to just look out for yourself and do what you wanted to do. Even then, it was clear that this wasn't the real

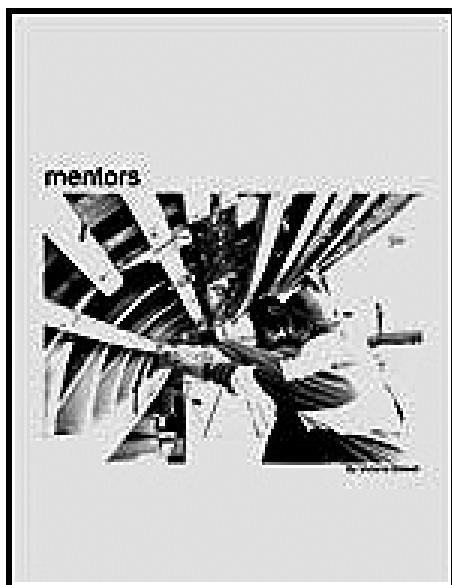
Marco speaking -- the Marco that so many of his classmates value as a confidante and whose counsel they take seriously; the Marco who classmates know they can turn to when they're in trouble and who will treat them like a brother or a sister. No, the Marco of ninth grade was disillusioned with life and with learning...

[Still] I remember in ninth grade when I trooped all of you to an art exhibit downtown. At some point, I lost you -- no surprise -- and had to begin my ritual Marco rounds, but when I found you, you weren't into the trouble I had anticipated. Instead, you were deep in conversation with an old veteran who was volunteering as curator at the exhibit. You were asking him interesting questions about the pieces and by the time we had left, you had him so interested in The Met, that he was volunteering to be a mentor.

You amazed me then and you continue to amaze me now. People like you are few and far between. So as you plan your next steps and venture out into the world, don't forget that there's a little school called The Met Center filled with people who know and love you. People who respect who you are and all you've done and we're also in the habit of tracking you down, so don't think you'll be able to hide. So if things ever are not going your way, swing by and we'll help you remember the secret to your success -- "smile in the morning, you'll smile throughout the afternoon..." fade out with a beat -----

2.0 On mentors

*For her senior project, Met student Victoria Stilwell documented through words and images 30 student-mentor pairings in workplace internships, creating a book called **Mentors**. After on-site visits for interviews and photo shoots, she wrote the text, selected images, returned drafts for fact-checking, collected release forms, and designed the layout—with, of course, support from her own mentor.*



"To me, the field I'm in, crafts and metals, has been a field of mentoring and apprentices and that's the only way handiwork can be passed down," explains Boris. "As soon as there is nobody showing anybody else how to do it, it's going to die out.... The most satisfying part of this is that [Dan's] caught the bug. He likes metal work; he'll always remember where it came from. He'll realize his link in the chain and be aware of his responsibilities to pass it on to someone else."

— Boris Bally, mentor and metalsmith, on his work with Met junior, Dan

[Click on book cover to see excerpts](#)

From *Mentors*

“The most satisfying part of this is that he’s caught the bug.”

Boris Bally, a metalsmith artist in Providence, Rhode Island, became a mentor to Dan Niebels, because he knows the value of a mentor,

"I've been an apprentice before, and I know that's the best way to learn anything. I think that a lot of the time in school the context of working in society is missing, which is what we all do eventually," explains Boris.

One day, Boris received a phone call from Dan, then a sophomore, now a junior, asking if he could come in and shadow Boris for a day.

"I was kind of intrigued, so he interviewed me and I told him that I would eventually love to have an apprentice and he kind of raised his eyebrows and went back to school to talk to his advisor. Shortly thereafter he became my - I like to call him my apprentice."

One of Boris' first inspirations to pursue metalsmithing was an apprenticeship he had when he was fourteen with a man who practiced martial arts and had a jewelry shop in Pittsburgh. After spending some time there he met Tom Mann.

"He was a long haired hippie freak who was making earrings at the time and was constantly surrounded by beautiful women and I said, 'Hey,

someday I want to be just like him.' He gave me my first solo show some twenty years later, and we're still in touch."

This year, Boris and Dan worked together to make a totem pole constructed from guns and cement. Together they traveled to Pennsylvania to participate in a gun buyback program, to disable the guns and incorporate them into the totem.

"I think it was the greatest project we've ever done," says Boris. "It really kind of encompasses a really special thing that we had and that we'll both probably never forget for the rest of our lives. The reason for that is that it was a learning experience for both of us. I didn't know what the hell I was doing, and neither did Dan. It gave me courage to do this piece with Dan and it was neat kind of learning side by side. Dan did a lot of the welding stuff, I really don't know much about welding.

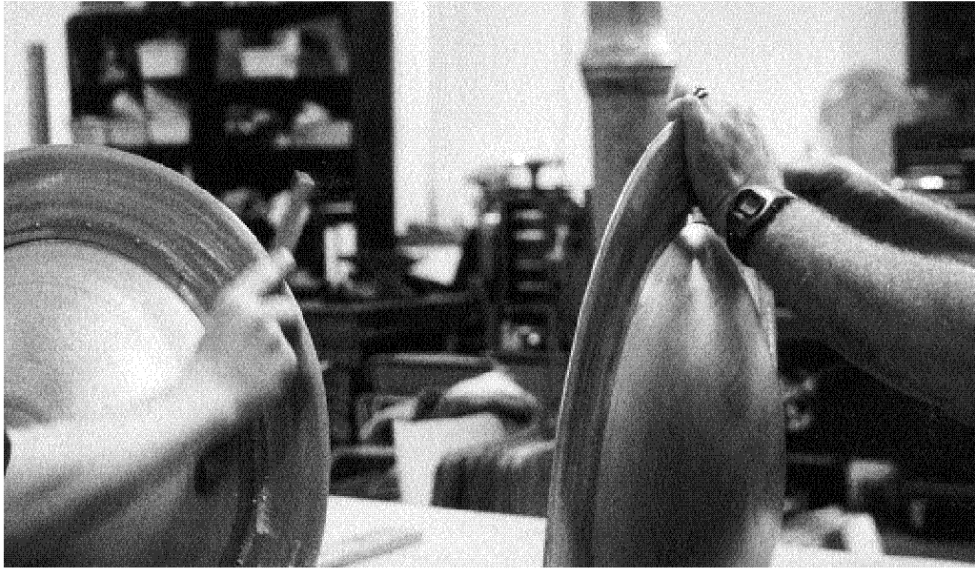
"I think what Dan must have thought was, 'Here's somebody who has had good backup experience, a repertoire of different skills. He's never done this, but look, he's not afraid to do it.' I kind of hope that's what he sees, that really there's nothing to life, you just have to take the plunge. It's good to be in over your

head as long as you're not in too over your head."

The next part of the gun totem project, which Dan is completely taking over, is putting together the documentary of the making of the Gun Totem.

Together, Boris and Dan make trips to scrap yards for metal, they went to Pittsburgh to disable the handguns, and now Dan's going to take a week and sneak a look at the marketing end, helping Boris sell the metal chairs and bowls and countless other sculptures that Boris makes his living with.

"To me, the field I'm in, crafts and metals, has been a field of mentoring and apprentices and that's the only way handiwork can be passed down," explains Boris. "As soon as there is nobody showing anybody else how to do it it's going to die out. Unfortunately, it's already happening. If Dan doesn't carry this on, no one will and it'll be kind of sad. I think the most satisfying part of this is that he's caught the bug. He likes metal work; he'll always remember where it came from. He'll realize his link in the chain and be aware of his responsibilities to pass it on to someone else."



3
9

3.0 An advisory in brief

At The Met, each advisory group has its own “dedicated” classroom space where students can meet as a group and store their belongings. Advisories meet for a half hour after each morning’s school-wide Pick Me Up and again for a half hour at the end of the day. The students in Damian Gonzalez’s advisory are all 10th graders. Three visitors from New Haven, with plans to start a school modeled after The Met, sit in on this morning’s session.

Damian’s advisory: 1.22.03

9:30 - 10:00 Group time

Damian invites students to introduce themselves to today’s visitors. The informality and intimacy of the group quickly surface. “I’m Ashley,” “Gladys,” “Natalie” give way to “Precious” and “Damn Sexy” as the introductions move around the table.

Damian shares his reflections on last week’s second quarter exhibitions by students. “Personally, I thought you all did a good job, better than first quarter,” he says. “I’m happy that you all stepped it up. Those of you who had gaps, I know you’ll fill them in. But all in all, I’m proud of you.”

He then asks students to share their own quick assessment of how they’d done. Some responses:

...I think my exhibition went well, because I’d researched it. Of the various things I covered in my exhibition, what I’m most proud of was my tuberculosis project. I’d researched it a lot and my parents learned from it. That was my goal.

...I felt I was articulate, that I had a game. In terms of all the hard stuff I’m going through, I’m proud that I actually did my exhibition. And the fact that my dad finally came to one of my exhibitions—that’s the best part of all.

...It wasn’t as good as my first quarter exhibition. And my mom didn’t like it; she was mad at me for some reason. Still, I was proud of everything I’d done and how much I’ve learned about myself.

...My exhibition was banging. And my mom liked it. She had no faith in me the night before. But when she came in, I shocked her. I proved that I was on target with my work.

...This is the first exhibition where I’ve been happy with what I’ve been doing, with my LTI. I’m also proud that I overcame my usual procrastination—that is, I procrastinated but didn’t let it discourage me.

Damian switches gears. “You know that the idea of the advisory is family support, responsibility, leadership,” he begins. “I want us to take a few minutes now and do a check on how we’re doing as a group.” Damian passes out a handout [see box at right]. “What I want you to do is to put your name

PERSONAL QUALITIES

Organization
Time Management
Punctuality
Leadership
Maturity
Consistency
Responsibility
Language
Respect
Focusing

next to those areas where you are weak and give it back to me when you're done. The point is for you to visualize the areas where you can improve.

"Now as you work on these weaknesses I want you to support each other. Say Marcos isn't well organized. Then I want him to go to Gladys and Natalie, who excel in organization, and enlist their help." Students chat as they begin to work on the handout:

...Are we still sticking to the name "Day-Day's Kids" [Damian's Kids] for our advisory group?

...No, we're growing out of that name.

...But we're always going to be his kids.

...No, we're growing up, we aren't just his kids anymore.

...I think we definitely need to find a new name.

Damian ends group time by throwing out a "scenario"—a staple of Met advisory group meetings, aimed at sparking reflection and discussion:

"We're on a boat. It's sinking. We're all going to die except for one person who gets to live. Who would you pick and why? And it can't be yourself!"

Some answers:

...Crystal lives. Remember when we went to her grandfather's funeral and she saved herself? She deserves the chance to follow through on what she committed herself to that night.

...Gladys, because she is doing things. She does more work than the rest of us, she's determined to get everything she can from her education.

... Marcos lives. I can't let him die a virgin.

...Natalie lives because she's going through a lot right now, I know she is, and she does so much work.

...Let Matt live. He has such a strong character, a lot of potential to do good things. Plus he needs to experience more things.

And some last words from those going down with the ship:

...What I would want my family and friends to remember me by is my artistic ability. And for everyone in my advisory to know that I grew to love them and that I love my family.

...That I love my family, that they did bring up somebody to be somebody. To my advisory, it's been an honor to know you.

...I'd thank my father for everything he's done, for being the best father in the world, for standing by me always. I'd want to give honor to my brother for all he's been through. And I'd thank my classmates for being there and my advisor.

...I'd ask my mom for her forgiveness.

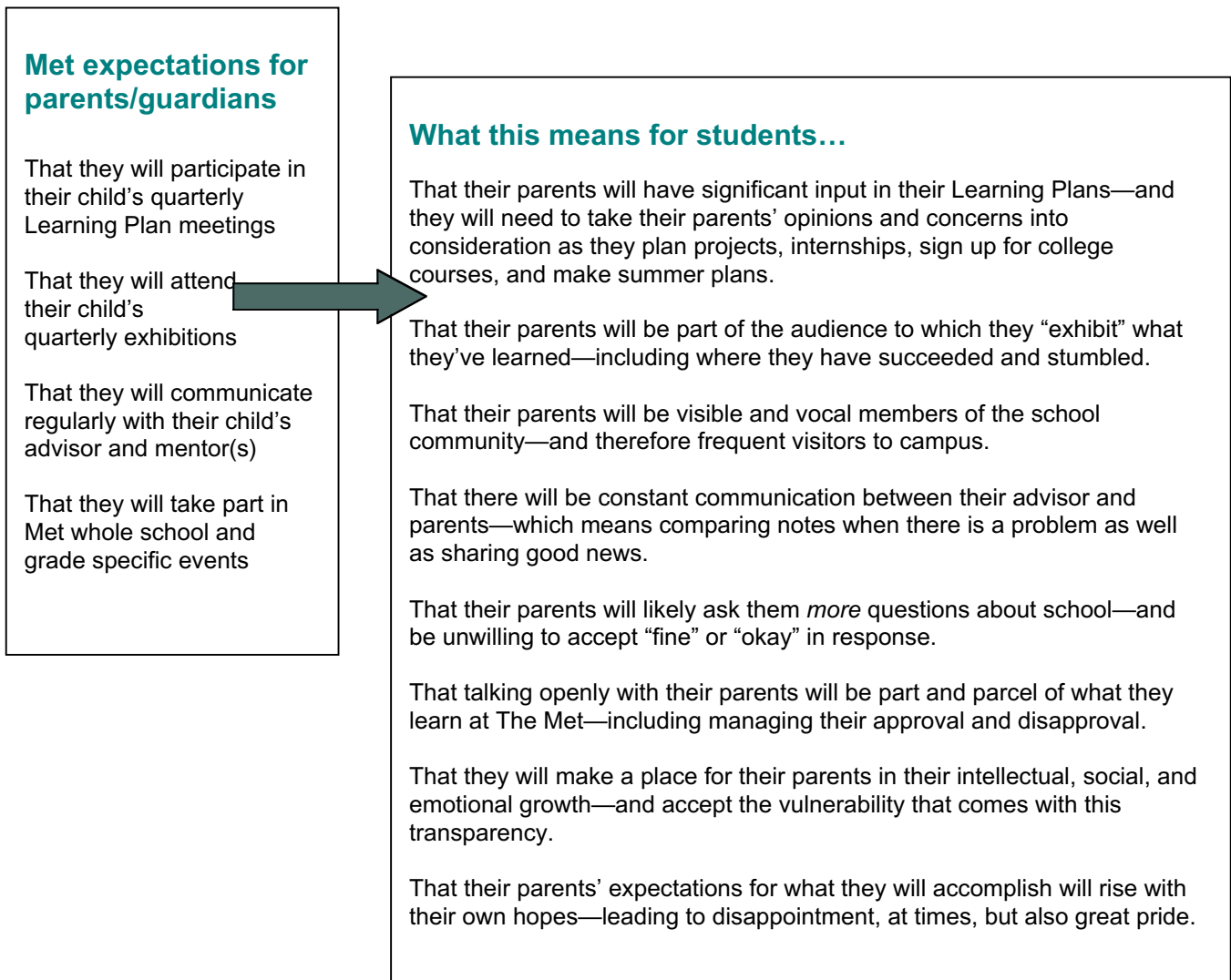
10:00 – 10:30

Independent work time

[Students start these tasks now and then continue to work on them during the day, as their schedule permits.]

- Fill out RI Department of Education’s SALT survey of student attitudes
- Rough draft of 3rd quarter narrative
- Double check Gateway binder
- Choose a book for 3rd quarter
- Work on resume
- Schedule date to lead advisory before Gateway
- Complete any unfinished 2nd quarter work

4.0 Diagramming student-parent relationships



5.0 Student projects involving The Met community

At the same time that Met students pursue LTIs outside school walls, they often make The Met itself the beneficiary of their interests, energy, and ideas. Recent examples include:

Continued the school's Men's Group started in 1999: organized and facilitated the weekly meetings, researched young men's issues, and organized field trips to help the group bond and share positive experiences. [Click here](#) for Men's Group project proposal and syllabus in PDF format.

Organized The Met's first baseball team: recruited student players, gathered necessary health forms, raised funds to buy equipment, led practices with a mentor, and communicated with other local high school teams to organize competitive games.

Led the school's Buddy Program: made sure all of the students involved in the program communicated with each other on a regular basis; documented their interactions with students; organized monthly meetings with participants. Concluded by creating a handbook on how to run a successful buddy program based on research and assessing The Met's program.

Translated the first chapter of One Kid at a Time, Eliot Levine's book about The Met, into Spanish by working with a professional translator and generating several drafts.

Helped to plan and start a school-based health center at the new campus of The Met: conducted a needs assessment of the community; involved parents; ran the advisory board; recruited service providers; planned the set-up of the facility; met with grant writers and foundations; and presented the project to The Met community and others.

Helped to start The Met's first radio station, to open in 2002-2003: researched the applicable laws, determined where equipment will be stored and monitored, raised funds, interned with WHJY to learn all of the aspects of running a radio station, and created a binder for the school to use once the facility is ready.

For my Senior Thesis Project I want to start a men's support group. The class will be during school hours between 12:30 and 1:30 and it will be held on Wednesdays and Fridays. This class will be available to men who are really committed to the group. I will have all the men who are interested write an essay of why they want to join a male support group, then I will conduct an interview with each student. ... [The] group will be confidential; there'll be emotional safety and support as well as guest speakers, articles to read, movies to watch, trips to take, and stories to share, and we will discuss and reflect at the end of all of these. Here are some of the issues to be discussed...

[Full project proposal in PDF format](#)



Student learning in small schools: an online portfolio © 2003
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