ALLEVIATE THE STRESS OF MEETING WITH PARENTS: USE STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES

s there an alternative to the traditional parent-teacher conference at report-card time? The answer is "*Absolutely*!" In the conventional parent-teacher conference, the students are left out of the meeting, waiting nervously for their parents to report what the teacher said about them. Leaving children out of the reporting process means they do not learn much from the experience or gain meaningful insights about themselves as learners. At the same time, the teachers are exhausted from hours of talking to parents, many times repeating verbatim what is on the report card.

At times, what the parents hear at home from their child is quite different from the picture the teacher painted. Parents are then in the difficult position of either believing their child or the teacher. This places them and the teacher on the defensive, blocking open communication and better understanding.

The traditional ways of reporting student progress do little to encourage dialogue between parent and child or to help students to take responsibility for their own learning. Fortunately, student-led conferences are emerging as a positive alternative. The primary purpose of student-led conferences is to encourage young people to accept personal responsibility for reporting their academic progress to their parents. Student-led conferences have been described by Richard Stiggins in *Phi Delta Kappan* as "the biggest breakthrough in communicating about student performance in the last century."[1]

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Benefits of Student-Led Conferences

This approach has several benefits for the parent, student, and teacher and fits with contemporary thinking about the student's role in education. Here are some positive features:

Parent Benefits

• Parents show a greater interest and are more likely to attend conferences.[2]

• They provide a setting for parents to learn more about their children, the school, and the teacher.

• Parents see their child in a different light. They hold conversations that would not ordinarily have taken place.

• Parents see the pride their child takes in his or her work, and better sense their child's excitement about learning.

• Parents become more aware of their child's needs and progress in learning.

• Parents can learn more about how to work with the child at home.

BY MICHAEL ENGLAND

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Using gumdrops and spaghetti, 6th-grade students construct objects that they will display during conferences.

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A student shares portfolio items with her parent during a student-led conference.

Student Benefits

• The student's performance is a form of authentic assessment. Wiggins explains that "the aim of education is to help the individual become a competent intellectual performer."[3] Student-led conferences place students at center stage as active learners, rather than pas-sive recipients of information.

• Students engage in self-evaluation, which motivates them to produce quality work. Portfolios also assume increased importance, since students must decide which items to include and explain why they chose to share them with their parents.

• Students learn to accept responsibility for their own learning. "When students are well prepared over an extended period to tell the story of their own success (or lack thereof), they seem to experience a fundamental shift in their internal sense of responsibility for that success. The pride in accomplishment that students feel when they have a positive story to tell and tell it well can be immensely motivational. The sense of personal responsibility that they feel when anticipating what it will be like to face the music of having to tell their story of poor achievement can also drive them to productive work."[4]

• Students develop organizational and oral communication skills, and increase their self-confidence.

Teacher Benefits

• Student-led conferences model the "student as worker" principle of the Coalition of Essential Schools.[5] The role of the teacher is redefined, allowing him or her to act as a coach and facilitator.

• Teachers can monitor performance and provide feedback to the student.

• Teachers learn more about their students as they watch them talk with their parents. This helps them understand each student better and to adjust their program to meet individual and family needs.

• Because of their constructive approach, student-led conferences foster positive communication between parent and student and encourage parents to attend the conferences. This positive experience also helps to establish solid working relationships between teacher and parent throughout the year.

Because they empower students, these conferences can offer a constructive and rewarding experience. The conference atmosphere becomes relaxed and supportive. Referring to traditional conferences, one parent said to me, "Why should I come just to hear all the teachers tell me what a rotten kid my son is?" This statement supports Glasser's assertion that many parents do not support the school because they only hear from the teacher or principal when their children are doing poorly.[6]

The lines of communication must be kept open between home and school.

The primary purpose of student-led conferences is to encourage young people to accept personal responsibility for reporting their academic progress to their parents.

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Students work on an assignment that will be included in their portfolios.

There should be no surprises at report-card time. Teachers should keep parents informed about their children's progress and school activities. This can be done in a variety of ways, including mid-term progress reports, newsletters and printed announcements, E-mail, and telephone calls.

Faculties using this model frequently report that, as a result of involvement in student-led conferences, bonds between parents and teachers are strengthened. Both teacher and parent are more likely to initiate subsequent contacts throughout the remainder of the school year.[7]

Getting Started

Student-led conferences involve three groups: parents, students, and teachers. Although the format and content may vary from school to school, the philosophy remains the same: The student is in charge. The teacher simply serves as a discussion facilitator. Instead of the teacher explaining to the parents what the student has been studying and how well he or she is learning, the teacher (1) assists the student in preparing a portfolio and a presentation, (2) helps the student explain to his or her parent what has been learned, and (3) assesses how well the conference went.

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A 6th grader discusses his projects and academic progress during a student-led conference.

There are three phases to student-led conferences:[8]
1. Preparing for the conference;
2. Conducting the conference; and
3. Assessing the quality of the conference.

Preparing for the Conference

• Create a form letter inviting parents to attend the conference. Include the date, time, and place.
• Use classroom centers that offer a variety of activities from which the children can choose. It's best to use centers that are already in the classroom and to which the children are accustomed.
• Help students create a portfolio.
• Practice the introduction to the conference.
• Help students role-play their presentations.
• Set up the room for the conference.

With today's emphasis on using all

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Sixth-grade students do a "hands-on" science experiment for their portfolios.

of the intelligences,[9] it is wise to set up centers around the room that give the students an opportunity to express themselves in a variety of ways. Centers could include:

• Emotional/Social Development—Intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences;

• Aesthetic and Artistic Development—Visual-spatial, musical, and naturalistic intelligences;

• Physical Development—Bodily kinesthetic intelligence; and

• Intellectual Development—Linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences.

The portfolio should include the student's (1) best work in the various subject areas, (2) progress toward his or her learning goals, and (3) ways he or she has helped group-mates reach their goals.

Students must be allowed sufficient time to prepare their conference folders and scripts. They also need to practice role-playing various conference scenarios with student partners. Be sure to provide feedback that will help students improve their presentations. As they practice, students gain confidence and learn to anticipate questions that may be asked by their parents.

Conducting the Conference

Some teachers prefer to be present with the student and parent, serving as

Student-led conferences place students at center stage as active learners, rather than passive recipients of information.

a co-leader and coach. Others hold three to four conferences in their room simultaneously, moving freely from family to family and spending only a few minutes with each group.

This format provides an excellent opportunity for students to share the contents of their portfolios and to explain why each item was included. Discussion of academic grades is typically the primary focus of the student-led conference, but this should not be the only activity. The conference agenda should include a discussion of items that help explain grades (such as test and homework scores, homework assignments and student projects, and records of class attendance, class partic-

ipation, and the number and types of missing assignments) and discussion of self-selected academic and social goals for the upcoming term. It is important to include both academic and social components in the discussion, but the affective elements should not overshadow the focus on the child's academic progress.

Placing students in charge of the conference makes each child individually accountable, encourages students to take pride in their work, and encourages child-parent communication about school performance.

Assessing the Conference

Either immediately following the conference or shortly thereafter, students, parents, and teachers should be given an opportunity to provide feedback concerning the effectiveness of the format. This feedback helps teachers fine-tune the conference model to make it more responsive to the expressed needs of students and parents. Parents should be asked to complete questionnaires, noting their level of satisfaction with the student-led format and recommending improvements in the process.

Some parents may support the student-led approach but still want an opportunity to speak with the teacher alone. This may be true particularly when the model is first used, since parents are unfamiliar with the concept. Teachers can reserve a few minutes at the end of each conference to speak privately with parents. In some cases, parents may not want a student-led conference, so teachers should allow parents to choose either the traditional or the student-led format.

Schools using this model have found that parent attendance at conferences has increased, and more than 90 percent of parents and students prefer the student-led conference.[10] Students say they feel greater self-confidence and personal satisfaction from their involvement in the conferences. Parents begin to see that their children can assume greater levels of responsibility. They appreciate the opportunity to improve communication with their children. Because of the more positive and relaxed atmosphere, teachers report a reduced conference

preparation workload and diminished stress levels during conferences.

Possible Concerns About Student-Led Conferences

• *I have a large class. How can I ever get all of these children ready for student-led conferences?*

Start with five or six the first year. Call for volunteers or ask students privately if they would like to try something new. Obviously, a major obstacle is the time needed to get the students ready to make their presentations. Student-led conferences work best if begun the second conference of the year. This allows time for the students to develop their portfolios.

• *Won't student-led conferences take longer than the usual teacher-parent meetings?*

Since student-led conferences will probably include more content than a traditional parent-teacher conference, they will require more time. For example, Countryman and Schroeder's[11] initial experience with student-led conferencing quickly led them to conclude that their usual 15-minute time-frame was insufficient. Many schools recommend 20 or 30 minutes to allow for more substantive discussions.[12]

• *What if a child's parents are not living together?*

The child is usually very willing to take each through a separate conference.

• *What if the parents do not speak English?*

The child can conduct the conference in the language they speak at home or the school can arrange for a translator.

• *What if the parents do not come to the conference?*

Occasionally, in spite of the best efforts of both student and teacher, a parent is unable to attend the scheduled conference. With the traditional parent-teacher conference, the teacher may never have an opportunity to meet with the parent. However, when students are excited about the conference, they will do their best to get their parent(s) there. Sometimes, the conference may have to be rescheduled.

• *What if the parent has questions*

he or she wants to ask the teacher during the conference?

Leave enough time for them to talk to you at the end. Deal with brief questions and then ask them politely to allow the student to continue with his or her presentation.

• *What if students do not want to participate because of shyness, poor grades, or reluctance to engage in self-evaluation?*

Most students will be enthusiastic about showing their parents what they have learned. However, participation should be voluntary. You may need to help shy students develop the self-confidence to lead out in a conference. If a student is uncooperative or fears parental rage at poor grades, it may be best to schedule traditional parent-teacher conferences that term, then work on the problem and try to arrange a student-led conference later in the year.

One of the many advantages to student-led conferences is that the students are forced to accept responsibility for telling their parents about their schoolwork. Student-led conferences help students become more accountable for their achievement. The conferences also help students develop better communication and organizational skills. Students also benefit from taking a leadership role in showing what they have accomplished.

Conclusion

Setting a conferencing format should be seen as a process, rather than an event. Parents and students should not fixate on past unsatisfactory performance; rather, they should be trained to engage in mutual problem-solving. The teacher can help families develop a plan of action that recognizes the student's accountability for academic progress while permitting parents to support the child in appropriate ways. Every teacher I have talked to who has used student-led conferences says he or she will never go back to the traditional method. Most say that they now look forward to conference time and that parent attendance at conferences has increased. Parents, in general, appreciate receiving specific academic feedback from their children

in a supportive environment. The child's perspective can best be summarized in the words of this student: "I like this new way because we get to have our two cents in it!"

My experience with student-led conferences has clearly demonstrated that they are a very effective method of building students' self-esteem and allowing them to take pride in their accomplishments. The more children talk about learning, the better they will learn! ✑

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