Student-Led Conferences: A Growing Trend

For years parent-teacher conferences have been the primary means of parent-teacher communication. But now, many schools are trying something new -- student-led conferences that communicate not only how a student's doing but also why.

Parent-teacher conferences -- we all know how they go. Parents troop into classrooms to talk with teachers about their children's progress in school. Often, the process feels rushed, and parents leave feeling vaguely dissatisfied, as if they didn't really get what they came for.

For years that process has been the norm, but now it is changing. In more and more schools, students are leading conferences, and, overall, the word is that they're doing a fine job.

Many teachers themselves speak enthusiastically of the advantages of student-led conferences over teacher-led ones. "We found the [student-led] conferences most beneficial," said Keith Eddinger of the Marcus Whitman Middle School in Rushville, New York. "From a teacher's perspective, we were able to get a better picture of each child. It forced us to sit down with each student and review strengths and weaknesses. This conversation often told us the students learned more than perhaps we had measured through conventional assessments."

Eddinger added, "Our post-conference reviews with parents and students were overwhelmingly positive."

John Osgood, of C. L. Jones Middle School in Minden, Nebraska, found that "comments [about student-led conferences] from parents and board members were very positive."

Another staff member, Dick Philips, said, "Most parents listened to their child. It was interesting listening to [children] explain low grades to their parents. It did open the lines of communication."

"Several parents really liked it because it gave them an opportunity to see their child's work," said Sue Yant, another staff member. Yet "some [parents] said they hoped we [would hold] the traditional conference once a year."

STUDENT PREPARATION

"The format is important, but I believe the success of a student-led conference is most determined by..."
Conferences Hold Kids Accountable

Would you like to find a way to actively engage students in their learning process and increase parent attendance at conferences? Student-led conferences can accomplish those two objectives. Included: Highlights of research about student-led conferences.

Student-Led Conferences Successful in Elementary, Middle Grades

As student-led conferences grow in popularity, educators are finding ways to improve their flow and productivity. Preparing students and parents for what's involved and practicing before "going live" can help. Included: Descriptions of student-led conferences at different grade levels.

Be sure to check out our A-to-Z Glossary of School Issues.

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY

"The preparatory time is worth it," Hayden wrote, "especially when you hear a struggling student explaining what he or she learned from an assignment and taking responsibility for the score he or she achieved."

"[Students] need to understand that they are in control of their own efforts to learn the material," said Barbara Rommel, superintendent of the David Douglas School District in Oregon. (Source: "New Method Puts Student in Charge," an article published in the Oregonian newspaper.)

The Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century requires students to meet higher standards. By having students assess how they are progressing toward those standards, educators say, students will know how far they've come and how far they have to go to meet the standards.

"It helps them accept responsibility for their learning," said Patti Kinney, principal of Talent Middle School in Oregon.

"I like being able to tell my side of the story," Josh Whitney-Wise of Milwaukie, Oregon's, McLoughlin Middle School told the Oregonian.
ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Educators acknowledge that there are disadvantages as well as advantages to student-led conferences. Although parent attendance seems higher for student-led conferences than for teacher-led ones, a parent's failure to attend a student-led conference leads to a great deal of disappointment for a student who has worked hard to prepare.

Another disadvantage is that some parents want to spend more time with their child's teacher, receiving his or her viewpoint. Nearly all schools with student-led conferences will let parents make separate appointments to confer with teachers.

For the most part, parents support the concept of student-led conferences, though some support them with slight reservations. "My daughter was in a class that did student-led conferences a couple of years ago," said one parent of a child at Jones Middle School. "I think the object was to make the child feel a part of the whole process, to get them in tune with their own progress. As a parent, I felt like I still needed some info from the teachers and wanted more. But I do think the student gets a new perspective on their grades. Personally, I don't think it would be good to do this often, but once a year is good. When you ask if they were ‘beneficial,’ I can say yes and no. They were more beneficial to the student than to the parent."

But the advantages, say most teachers who have participated in student-led conferences, outweigh the downside. Student accountability is mentioned again and again by educators as a plus for student-led conferences. Another plus is the way even a struggling student can produce something positive for a conference, an art project or an essay, perhaps, that wouldn't show up in a report card grade. Overall, talks with educators indicate, student-led conferences are a growing trend.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Student-Led Parent Conferences [archived copy]
Tina Bonnett, author of A Guide to Implementing Student-Led Parent Conferences, provides an outline and guidelines for setting up conferences in this format.

Successful Student-Led School Conferences
Here's a growing collection of resources about successful conferences, with an emphasis on the student-led parent/teacher conference.

Caity's Conference: Kids Show Their Stuff at Student-Led Parent Conferences
When Robin and Stephen Kiley met with their daughter's second-grade teacher in February to discuss her progress at Willamette Primary School, a fourth person was in the room: their daughter Caity. In fact, Caity did most of the talking. (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory)

The Highs and Lows of Parent-Teacher Conferences
This article from "Changing Schools in Louisville" examines student participation in conferences. Tips for making conferences effective for all participants are included. Follow the links to "Parent Conference TIPS for Teachers."

Student-Led Conferences at the Middle Level
Student-led conferences are emerging as a positive alternative to the traditional middle level parent-teacher conference.

Student Led Conferences Interdisciplinary Project
This site describes a detailed plan for student-led conferences at Frisbie Middle School in Rialto, California.

Books

http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin112.shtml
A School-Wide Approach to Student-Led Conferences: A Practitioner’s Guide
By Patti Kinney, Mary Beth Munroe, Pam Sessions; National Middle School Association, June 2000 (paperback).

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Student-Led Conferencing Using Showcase Portfolios

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