

PREVIEW

Student-led conferences make students accountable for their work and a partner in improvement efforts.

Specific skills, including self-evaluation and self-reflection, that students need to conduct conferences must be taught and practiced.

Teachers and parents must also be prepared to participate to make student-led conferences successful.

LETTING STUDENTS TAKE THE LEAD

BY PATTI KINNEY

One of the things we like best about these conferences is that we get to share and explain our work. It's easier to say what we feel about our work instead of having a teacher tell how we're doing. Sometimes grades don't say it all; these conferences give us a chance to say why we do or don't deserve the letter grade. We think the parents have more of an interest and make more of an effort in coming to our conferences because they enjoy listening to our presentation. The self-reflections help us understand what we need to improve on. We feel that student-led conferencing is helping us get to a higher level of learning and we hope to continue doing these through high school.

—Kelly, Annie, and Erin, Grade 8 Students

These words appear on an old transparency I used in my presentations on student-led conferences during the pre-PowerPoint days. I smile as I read them, remembering the girls, now all college graduates, and being reminded of just how many years student-led conferencing has been an embedded practice at Talent Middle School in Oregon where I am principal. It began in the early 1990s when two teachers heard about the process at a conference and came back eager to try it with their classes. Their success piqued the interest of other staff members, and within a few years, it was a firmly rooted school practice.

Stiggins (2005) regards the student-led conference format as “the biggest breakthrough to happen in communicating about student achievement in the past century” (p. 349). With assessment playing such an integral part in the lives of today's educators, this process stands out as a refreshing, authentic practice that puts the emphasis on student participation and accountability. I remember traditional parent-teacher conferences when I was a teacher in which the parents and I discussed the need for their child to accept more responsibility for their work and worked together to set strategies to make that happen. But most of the time our plans failed because the most important piece of the puzzle was missing—the student was not present. Student-led conferences address this issue by putting the student at the center of the process; he or she becomes the one responsible for sharing his or her growth—or lack of growth—as a learner and helps devise a plan for future progress.

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After meeting the student's parents, the conference facilitator fades into the background to allow the student to take the lead in facilitating the conference.

Student-led conferences can be organized in many ways; most involve students following an outline or a script to share work with their parents. A typical conference at Talent Middle School begins with students introducing their parents or guardians to the conference facilitator. Once that is accomplished, the facilitator fades to the background, and the student begins the conference by reading a previously composed "Dear Parent" letter to give an overview of what the parents can expect. The student then shares work samples from each of his or her classes, emphasizing and illustrating areas of strength and areas for growth. To finish the conference, the student and the parent work together to set goals for the future.

Although this is a seemingly simple process to follow, student-led conferences require considerable planning and organization. The benefits, however, are many and well worth the effort. Perhaps the most significant benefit is the increase in parent participation: Prior to implementing student-led conferences our parent participation rate was about 45%; it now hovers between 92% and 95%. Other noted benefits include giving students the opportunity to practice the real-life skills of organization, communication, and leadership; better accommodating the parents who do not speak English; teaching students to become self-reflective learners; empowering students to make improvement through the goal-setting process; and giving parents a clearer understanding of student expectations for learning.

Teaching the Skills

I can remember my mother asking me why I received a certain grade on a paper and honestly being unable to give her an answer—I had no clue why the teacher had graded the paper the way she did. To avoid this type of scenario during a student-led conference, students must be taught to self-evalu-

ate and self-reflect on their learning. Self-evaluation is the process of assessing a performance against a set standard to judge the quality of the work. Teachers can do this by teaching their students to score their work against a state or district scoring guide, a set of previously given criteria for the assignment, or other predetermined performance standards.

The purpose of self-reflection is to help students better understand their personal learning process and to teach them to assess themselves as learners. Reflections should be designed to encourage honest recognition of strengths, to identify areas to work on, and to assist in goal setting. Formats for self-reflections include:

- Writing answers to highly specific questions
- Drawing a picture or making a web of the learning process to illustrate what was learned and what must be done differently next time
- Writing a letter from the teacher's perspective explaining why the project was graded the way it was
- Filling out a checklist or a chart
- Participating in a class discussion or a one-on-one conference
- Creating a journal entry or responding in learning logs.

To be most effective, students should be asked to reflect at least several times during a term on assignments of major importance. A summative reflection is also useful in helping students to recognize growth over time and to aide in setting short-term goals for the next term.

Making It Happen

It isn't possible to discuss all the ins and outs of student-led conferences in a magazine article, but the following thoughts are designed to guide a principal who is interested in implementing this process in his or her school. The most important thing to note is that the key to holding successful student-led conferences is twofold—organization and preparation.

Organization

Establish the purpose for your conferences. Do you want participants to focus on the school year ahead or to celebrate the learning that has taken place and set a direction for the following school year? Answering this question will help you decide what time of year to hold the conferences and what information the students will share.

Decide who will be responsible for facilitating the conference. School structure can play a factor in determining this. Do you have an advisory or homeroom program? Are students grouped on teams? How will you involve your elective teachers? Because equity was an important consideration when we established student-led conferences at Talent, *all* certified staff members facilitate the conferences. As principal, I have a group of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders that I work with. Each year, my eighth graders are replaced by incoming sixth graders; so I am able to develop relationships with these students and their families over three years.

Determine how you will schedule students for the conferences. Decide how many days and what hours you will devote to the conferences. You will then need to decide on a master schedule, who will do the scheduling, how many conferences will be held at one time, and how to accommodate families with multiple students at the school. My student services secretary schedules families by calling down the oldest child in the family to determine times for the conferences. Conference facilitators then receive their schedules, meet with their students to determine an appointment time, and prepare a postcard with the information that is mailed to the family. To accommodate changes, the postcard indicates a name and number to call if the conference needs to be rescheduled. Our master schedule allows for three or four conferences to be held at a time with drop-in time between the conferences so parents and students can visit individual teachers if they want to do so.

Create a timeline for the conferences. This is easiest if you work backward from the actual conferences. It is extremely important for all staff members to know the dates and deadlines well in advance and to fully understand what will be expected of them as both teachers and as conference facilitators.

Teacher Preparation

Teachers generally wear two hats during the student-led conferencing process and each role is somewhat different. Teachers must design and present lessons that emphasize multiple skills and processes, teach and practice the skills required for self-reflection, and collect work in portfolios or another long-term storage system. Prior to the conference, the teacher helps students sort through their classroom work and choose examples for the conference, review self-reflections of chosen work, complete summary reflections of work to date, and practice sharing work from the particular subject area.

As the conference facilitator, the teacher schedules conferences according to the agreed-upon procedure, helps students organize their work from all classes into a conference portfolio, helps students work through the goal setting procedure, teaches the conference process and script to the students, and allows time for students to practice.

Student Preparation

Preparing students to be in charge of a student-led conference requires students to learn and apply skills in organization, self-analysis, communication, and goal setting. To aid students in getting ready for their conferences, we ask them to organize their conference portfolios by filling out a table of contents and placing their work in the specified order. They also write a “Dear Parent” letter to use as an icebreaker to welcome parents and share what they will be hearing during the conference.

Most schools have students follow a predetermined

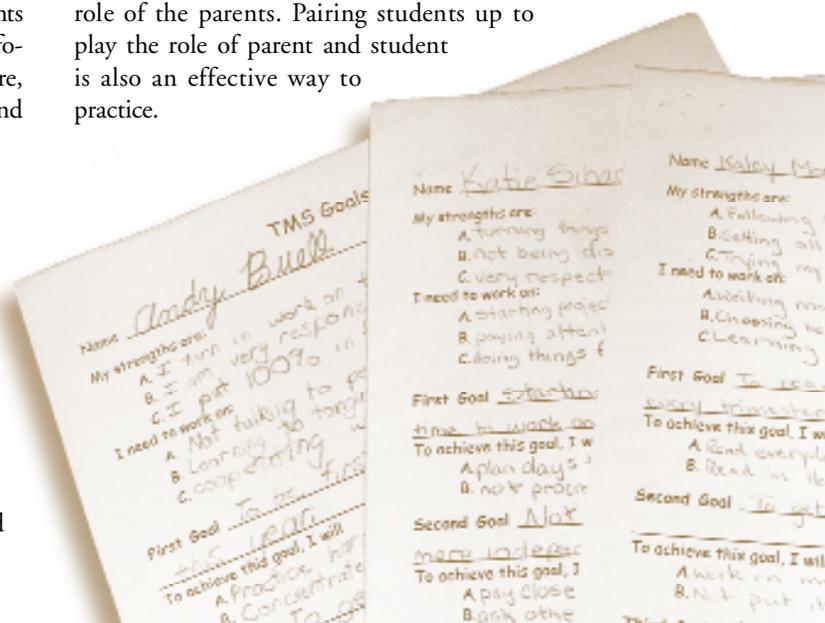
BENEFITS OF STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES

- Parent participation increases.
- Students practice the real life skills of organization, communication, and leadership.
- Parents who do not speak English are better accommodated.
- Students become self-reflective learners.
- Students learn to make improvement through a goal setting process.
- Parents gain a clearer understanding of expectations for learning.

script as they lead their conferences. This can be as simple as a follow-the-order list of procedures to use during the conference. For example, when sharing a piece of work, the student may be asked to share what the assignment was, explain the knowledge or skills he or she learned by doing it, describe the process that was followed to complete the project, and read aloud key portions of his or her completed self-reflection. Other schools have created a more detailed script that simply requires students to fill in the blanks of a prewritten narrative.

Students must also learn how to write realistic goals and identify specific actions they will need to take to accomplish the goals. At Talent, we ask students to write two goals prior to the conference and another one with their parents during the conference. For example, one of my students had a goal of improving her attendance at school. To accomplish this she was going to go to bed earlier, eat a healthier diet, and get a flu shot.

Finally, students must be given the opportunity to practice prior to the conferences. When the process is new to students, it is helpful to create a video to show how the conference will look. Choose a capable student who can quickly learn and model the process and ask a couple of teachers to play the role of the parents. Pairing students up to play the role of parent and student is also an effective way to practice.



Parent Preparation

Helping parents make the switch from traditional to student-led conferences is vital to the success of the conferences. Parents should be given information well in advance through parent meetings, letters mailed home, or articles in the school newsletter. Be sure to explain the reasons and rationale for making the change and let parents know what to expect during the conferences. Inform them that the role of the teacher will have changed from the traditional format and that the student will now be the provider of information. Most important, let parents know that teachers will be willing to meet with them at a later time if they have concerns that were not addressed during the student-led conference.

By now, you may have more questions than answers as you realize that moving to student-led conferences is not a simple or easy undertaking for a school. Successful implementation requires a well-thought-out plan and may require additional professional development training for staff members. Should you decide to take on this challenge, research the topic thoroughly and involve as many people as possible in developing your school's process—and don't forget to include those who may be negative about the change because by addressing their issues you will develop a stronger model for your school.

Having worked with this process for more than a decade,

RESOURCES

Increasing Student and Parent Involvement Through Student-Led Conferences (CD kit). By J. Berckemeyer, & P. Kinney. (2004). Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.

The What, Why, and How of Student-Led Conferences (Professional development kit). By J. Berckemeyer & P. Kinney. (2005). Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.

A School-Wide Approach to Student-Led Conferences: A Practitioner's Guide. By P. Kinney, M. Munroe, & P. Sessions. (2000). Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.

I feel confident encouraging you to seriously consider using this practice at your school. If you are looking for an assessment method that holds students accountable by giving them an active and meaningful role in evaluating their own learning, offers them genuine opportunities for self-reflection, and fosters communication and leadership skills, then student-led conferencing is for you.

Reference

□ Stiggins, R. (2005). *Student-involved assessment for learning* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.

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