ABSTRACT
        Students should be welcomed as active participants in
parent-teacher conferences, facilitating their conferences and
sharing their academic progress with their parents and teachers.
Concerned with the shortcomings of the traditional conference model,
faculty at a Kansas City, Missouri, middle school developed a
student-led conference model intended to encourage students to accept
responsibility for their academic success, to increase students' oral
communication skills and self-confidence, and to increase parent
participation. Each student develops an individualized plan
identifying personal "goals for growth," and during a seminar class,
students learn leadership skills to facilitate their conferences.
Prior to conference day, students compile a materials packet of
information they wish to share with their parents. They are
accountable for their grades and understand they must be prepared to
explain any unacceptable grades. Materials presented at the
conference include: (1) the "goals for growth" folder; (2)
student-designed "coat of arms" depicting the student's strengths;
student assignment notebooks; grade information; portfolios--academic
and career guidance; and a thank-you card from the student to the
parents. During the conferences, students and parents are encouraged
to focus on problem-solving strategies and to develop a plan of
action for the future rather than fixate on past performance. At the
end of the conference, parents and students complete questionnaires
evaluating the effectiveness of the student-led format, which have
generated both positive and negative parent responses. Teachers, on
the other hand, overwhelmingly support the student-led conferences.
While achieving all the goals of the traditional conference model,
student-led conferences include students as active partners in the
educational process. (HTH)

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Student-Led Conferences:

Encouraging Student-Parent Academic Discussions

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Middle-level parent-teacher conferences serve a variety of purposes, including helping to establish face-to-face relationships, providing families with opportunities for involvement, reinforcing the idea of parents and teachers working as a team, assuring student progress, celebrating successes, and solving problems that emerge, (Bernick, Rutherford, & Elliott, 1991, p. 2). Traditional parent-teacher conferences include many of these elements to varied degrees. However, in many instances students are not permitted to participate in the process. Students should be welcomed as active participants, facilitating their conferences and sharing their academic progress with their parents and teachers.

Limitations of Traditional Conferences

While the traditional parent-teacher conference has been an effective tool for providing academic feedback to parents, it has several limitations for teachers, parents, and students. From the teacher's perspective, conferences may be viewed as a school district tool for maintenance of positive public relations. Teachers may experience the stress of searching for positive feedback about a child or may fear a possible confrontation with a hostile parent. At a loss to explain why a student earned an unsatisfactory grade in another classroom, the conferencing teacher frequently can only direct the parent to other school personnel.

For parents the conference presents an opportunity for teachers to affirm what parents already know: Their child is either doing very well academically or is doing poorly. Of course, many teachers lament that parents of nonachieving children rarely attend conferences. In the words of one parent, "Why should I come just to hear all the teachers tell me what a terrible job my child is doing?"

Traditional conferences frequently exclude the student, who is a vital link in effective home-school communications. Students are often asked to remain at home, left to imagine the terrible indictments being brought against them and to await the inevitable

consequences when their parents return home. Even worse, a student may be threatened and cajoled to attend the conference, then forced to sit passively while teacher and parent discuss academic deficiencies, stopping occasionally for affirmation or on-the-spot interrogation and recrimination.

McLoughlin (1987) lists a dozen benefits of parent conferencing, including reducing discipline problems, communicating report card information, and facilitating a two-way dialogue between parent and teacher. However, McLoughlin does not address the role of the student in this process. Rotter, Robinson, and Fey (1987) assert that one-third of unresolved school-related student problems can be corrected through face-to-face parent-teacher discussions. Simply including the student in this equation could dramatically improve the success factor.

Middle school faculties who have embraced the "student as worker" and "teacher as coach" principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools (Sizer, 1986) question the effectiveness of a conferencing model that excludes students. Fortunately, some models have been developed that include students as equal partners in parent-teacher conferences at the elementary school level (Guyton & Fielstein, 1989; Little & Allan, 1989) and the middle level (Bernick et al., 1991). Students possess the relevant information concerning his or her academic progress. Therefore, it is logical to invite the student not only to attend but also to lead the conference discussion.

Student-Led Conference Goals

Concern with the traditional conferencing model led the Center Middle School (CMS) faculty to develop an alternative for use at their school conferences. Center Middle School is situated in Kansas City, Missouri, and serves an ethnically diverse student body of slightly over 400 seventh- and eight-grade students. The CMS faculty developed a student-led conference model to meet the following goals:

- to encourage students to accept responsibility for their academic progress,

- to encourage parents, students, and teachers to openly communicate as equal partners,
- to facilitate the development of students' oral communication skills and increase self-confidence, and
- to increase parent participation in the conferences.

This conferencing approach has been successfully used at Center Middle School since the 1993-94 school year. Traditional parent-teacher conferences had been previously scheduled once each year, at the end of the first quarter. The success of student-led conferencing prompted numerous requests for more frequent conferences, and conferences are now held twice each year, at the end of the first and third quarters

Preparing for the Conference

All CMS students enroll in a Seminar course with their team, in addition to their team classes of language arts, social studies, math, and science. The Seminar course addresses developmentally appropriate issues, including study skills instruction, career exploration activities, and permits team teachers to expand on interdisciplinary topics that are presented in the core classes.

Students are encouraged to assume personal responsibility for their academic progress. In Seminar students learn about efficacious behavior and understand that it is their personal effort that ultimately determines their success in each class.

At the beginning of each quarter students develop an Individualized Student Plan, with their assistance of their homeroom Teacher Advisor. In this plan, students identify personal "Goals for Growth" in five areas: academics, personal responsibility, leadership, community service, and physical/wellness health. *Academic goals* are intended to assist the student in the improvement of school performance and may include work in specific content areas, knowledge acquisition, and study habits. *Personal responsibility goals* assist the student in developing and/or refining of skills that will lead to greater independence and self-reliance. *Leadership goals* encourage the student to examine his/her

role in working relationships with others. *Community service goals* provide opportunities to learn about people and to develop habits of giving time and talents to others. *Physical/wellness health goals* help the student approach growth from a holistic system belief about life. Students develop an action plan for achieving each goal and set target dates to review their progress.

Team teachers and the school counselors present lessons during Seminar class to teach students the leadership skills to facilitate their conferences. Students role-play parent, teacher, and student to prepare them for leading their conferences and answering parent questions. Providing an opportunity for practice helps students develop confidence and builds anticipation for the upcoming conferences.

This conference model is designed to be a process, not an event. Therefore, students and parents are encouraged to focus on problem-solving strategies and to develop a plan of action for the future, rather than becoming fixated on past performance. The Teacher Advisor participates in the discussion, fielding questions students are unable to answer and intervening if parents become excessively concerned with their children's academic performance. Teacher facilitation of the actual conferences ensures a positive experience for both parent and student.

Prior to conference day, students compile a materials packet of information they wish to share with their parents. They are accountable for their grades and understand they must be prepared to explain the reasons for any unacceptable grades. This personal accountability encourages students to continually exert their best efforts in classes so their grade reports reflect achievement of their academic goals.

Letters explaining the student-led conference format are sent home prior to conference day. Parents indicate their conference time choices and may request individual conferences with teachers, then they return the forms to the Teacher Advisor. A week prior to conference day, parents receive a letter from their child noting their appointment time and

including suggestions for discussion topics and questions parents may wish to ask. These suggestions help parents to mentally prepare for conference day

The Conference

Conferences are scheduled in 20-minute blocks of time during regular school hours and evening hours. When the time of their appointment arrives, student and parents report to the Teacher Advisor's classroom. The following items are included in the conference materials that are shared among student, parent and teacher:

"Goals for Growth" folder. The Individualized Student Plan, complete with academic, personal responsibility, leadership, community service, and physical/wellness health goals, is listed on this folder. Students document their progress toward their goals in an activity log, including data such as class assignments, tests, participation in extracurricular activities, and any academic honors received throughout the quarter. Students may also share time management forms they have completed to help them analyze their effective use of time.

"Coat of Arms." This personal shield, created by the student, describes the skills the student does well, his/her greatest success in life, and the most influential people in the student's life.

Student Assignment Notebook. The assignment notebook provides evidence of completion of daily assignments, examinations, and academic successes.

Grade information. Each student completes a sheet indicating the expected grade in each course, the actual grade, and grade goal for the upcoming quarter. Students also list ways to improve or maintain their grades on this sheet. Copies of mid-quarter progress reports and the quarterly report card are also included.

Portfolios. Each student develops two portfolios with the assistance of teachers and counselors. The academic portfolio includes samples of the student's best work during the year. The "Get a Life" portfolio is also shared, which has career guidance information students have compiled as they explore career areas of interest.

Thank you cards. At the conclusion of the conference, the parents receive a card created by the student thanking them for participating.

After the student presentation, parents have an opportunity to ask questions of both student and teacher and to discuss areas of concern. Summarizing statements are made by all parties present, which include discussion of the goals the student intends to address during the upcoming quarter. Parents who wish to discuss their child's academic and/or behavioral concerns privately can ask their child to be excused from the conference, may report to another teacher for a subject-specific conference, or may schedule a follow-up conference with the team teachers at a later date.

Evaluation Results

Parents and students complete questionnaires evaluating the effectiveness of the student-led format at the conclusion of their conference. These questionnaire results assist the CMS faculty as they refine model to ensure maximum benefits for students, parents, and teachers. The evaluation held after the first quarter of the 1994-95 school year includes the results which follow.

Parent participation in the student-led conferences continues to improve. Conference attendance by parents was 93.1%, an increase from the usual 89-90% attendance rate at traditional parent-teacher conferences. This increase may be attributed to the fact that students are excited about the upcoming conferences and actively encourage their parents to attend. Of the 296 parents who completed a post-conference questionnaire, 96% found conferences to be "helpful" or "very helpful" and 94% preferred the student-led format over the traditional parent-teacher conference. Of 344 students completing the questionnaire, 97% reported the conferences were "helpful" or "very helpful" and 95% preferred the student-led model.

The questionnaire also afforded parents and students an opportunity to include comments and suggestions for future conferences. The following selected parent · comments indicate the range of responses, both positive and negative:

"Unique approach, takes courage and work on the part of students, teachers, and administration. Thanks for allowing my child the opportunity to lead and develop."

"I still prefer the traditional conference method."

"This is my first experience with a student-led conference. I felt it gave my daughter more responsibility and made her feel more accountable for her actions. There were a lot of positive benefits."

"I would like to talk to the teacher without my child present."

"I thought it was very nice having the students lead the conferences. I feel it makes them more responsible and also really lets them know and understand how they are getting the grade they are getting."

Selected student comments were as follows:

"I liked knowing what the parent and the teacher were saying about me."

"I think this is better because you can express your feelings instead of the teacher."

"I found the student-led conferences were helpful because *I* could explain my grades."

Teachers voice overwhelming support for the student-led format, noting a more positive and relaxed conferencing atmosphere, less teacher stress, and a reduced faculty workload in preparation for the conferences. Several teachers report they no longer feel "worn out" at the end of conferences.

Conclusion

Conference evaluations provide evidence that the Center Middle School student-led conference model is highly successful. The conference goals of encouraging student responsibility, encouraging open parent-student-teacher discussion, and developing student oral communication skills and self-confidence have been effectively met. In addition, the student-led format encourages more parents to attend conferences.

As a result of a process-oriented conferencing model, Center Middle School students are more accountable for their academic performance and students work more

diligently on school assignments in preparation for their upcoming conferences. More importantly, students appreciate being treated as equal partners and eagerly anticipate leading their personal conferences. Parents have expressed a heightened awareness of their children's steady progress toward adolescence and view them as being capable of making decisions and assuming increasingly complex responsibilities. Freed from the burden of leading multiple parent-teacher conferences, teachers can now enjoy the positive atmosphere created by the student-led conference model. Teachers also report more supportive communications when they contact parents throughout the school year.

Almost 7% of parents still do not attend conferences, which is a concern to the Center Middle School faculty. Some of these parents are unable to be released from work or family responsibilities, even though conference times can be scheduled during day or evening hours. Asking the school Parent Teacher Association to provide baby-sitting services during conferences may be one way to provide support for parents who cannot attend because of the need to care for younger children. However, the student-led format does not mandate that conferences be held at school. Therefore, non-attending parents and students are encouraged to conduct their conferences in their homes so they may still participate in this discussion. The Teacher Advisor and counselor also telephone non-attending parents to ensure positive parent-school communications.

While achieving all the goals of the traditional parent-teacher conference, the student-led conference model also includes students as active partners in the educational process. The student accountability fostered by this model teaches responsibility and encourages middle school students to develop a sense of ownership for their own academic progress. More importantly, it encourages parents and students to have frequent discussions about middle school academic issues.

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