

## **WHY STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES**

### **DEMONSTRATING ACADEMIC MASTERY**

"The culminating conference provides students the opportunity to demonstrate to parents and to the broader school community their academic mastery through performance or product." (Tuinstra, Hiatt-Michael, 2004: 60).

### **SELDOM A PART OF THE PROCESS**

In the traditional parent-teacher conference, the teacher, usually in the child's absence, tells the parent about the student's work. The child is seldom part of the conversation in the traditional conference structure and is given little if any opportunity by the school in any venue to discuss his/her academic work with his/her parents. (Tuinstra, Hiatt-Michael, 2004: 61)

### **NECESSITY OF ACADEMIC RESPONSIBILITY**

By the time the child reaches middle school, there is often little parent participation in the child's academic life and few school structures in place that encourage the child to take responsibility for his/her own learning. Consequently, the necessity for being responsible academically may completely escape the child. (Tuinstra, Hiatt-Michael, 2004: 61).

### **AFFIRMATION OF STUDENT STATUS**

"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" (Hackmann, 1995: 2).

### **STUDENT FREQUENTLY EXCLUDED**

"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" (Hackmann, 1995: 2, 3).

### **ONE-THIRD OF UNRESOLVED ISSUES**

"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" (Hackmann, 1995: 3).

### **STUDENTS POSSESS THE INFORMATION**

"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" (Hackmann, 1995: 3).

### **COMING TOGETHER**

"Finally, student-led conferences bring together parents, educators, and students in new, exciting, and collaborative ways" (Conderman, Ikan, & Hatcher, 2000: 25).

## **STAFF DEVELOPMENT**

### **PERSISTENT STUDENT-LED OBSTACLES**

Two areas of persistence are (a) streamlining paperwork and (b) finding adequate preparation time.

### **BUILDING CAPACITY AMONGST STAFF**

Staff development today must be done in light of “building capacity,” a term connoting that the new structures will be rooted in the organization and will not disappear when an individual leaves or when the budget is reduced. Senge (2000) notes that people only sustain interest if they choose to make a commitment on their own, through a nudge here, an inspiration there, and the provision of a role model (p. 273). Again, the importance of strong school leaders is imperative. (Tuinstra, Hiatt-Michael, 2004: 70)

### **CATALYST OF STAFF DEVELOPMENT**

Additional literature supports the importance of staff development as a catalyst for change (70)

### **NEED FOR CONTINUOUS REFLECTION**

Staff and administrators spoke of continuous reflection on the conferences, the preparation of students, the intent of direct instruction, the selection of work samples, and the execution of the conference itself. (Tuinstra, Hiatt-Michael, 2004: 70)

### **NEW TEACHER ROLES**

“Using student-led conferences effectively requires teachers to rethink some of their traditional roles. Teachers must develop new ways to interact with students and parents...The teacher must make it clear that he or she plays a critically important role in student-led conferences, but that role is in helping students prepare themselves to conduct the conference in a competent manner.” (Multnomah & Beaverton, 1994: 3).

### **REMAIN IN THE BACKGROUND**

“It is important that the teacher remain in the background as much as possible. Only occasionally should a teacher intervene, but then only to strengthen the child’s presentation by redirecting the discussion or reminding the child of additional possibilities” (Anthony, et.al., 1991) (Multnomah & Beaverton, 1994: 7).

## **ORGANIZATION AND SUPPORT**

### **METHODS OF TEACHER SUPPORT**

Each administrator in the study demonstrated support for SLC through released time for educators, provision of resources, and flexible conference scheduling. Administrators, moreover, reported they encouraged and supported their staff to present SLC workshops at interested schools and at conferences. Administrators also reported opening their doors to visitors from other schools interested in SLC. (Tuinstra, Hiatt-Michael, 2004: 68)

### **STRONG ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT AND REFORM**

Implementation of student-led parent conferences requires school willingness to make structural changes along with other school reforms and the continuous support of a strong administrator (Tuinstra, Hiatt-Michael, 2004: 68)

## POTENTIAL STRUCTURAL CHANGES

Structural changes must of necessity take place in schools implementing SLC. These include creating and storing portfolios, inviting parents to participate in SLC, and providing opportunity for the student and parents to conference together regarding the student's academic work (Tuinstra, Hiatt-Michael, 2004: 68)

## THREE PHASES OF IMPLEMENTATION

"We established three phases in implementing student-led conferences; (1) initial preparations, (2) conferences, and (3) evaluations. The team divided up responsibilities and implemented a time line from mid-December to mid-April to complete each task" (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996: 64).

## SIX-STEP APPROACH TO SLC'S

"Faculty at Prairie Middle School use six steps in their student-led conference approach: (a) inform; (b) educate, model, and teach; (c) set goals; (d) practice; (e) implement; and (f) evaluate" (Conderman, Ikan, & Hatcher, 2000: 24).

## THE FIRST STEP IN IMPLEMENTATION

"The first step in implementing student-led conferences is to build a communication link between parents and students" (Multnomah & Beaverton, 1994: 4).

## GUIDING STRUCTURES OF THE CONFERENCE

"After visiting schools that were using student-led conferences, the team decided on (1) a guiding structure for the conference, (2) a way to prepare students to run their own conferences; (3) a method of communicating the new format to parents and colleagues; (4) the procedural operations that we would need to develop" (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996: 64, 65).

## STUDENT DEVELOPED AGENDA

"Students decided that during the conference they would introduce their parents to the advisor, show parents their work, talk about the different units they studied, describe favorite units, explain missing or poorly done assignments, and highlight their strengths and weaknesses. From this conversation we wrote the student's conference script" (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996: 65).

## SCHEDULE REHEARSELS

"It is a good idea to schedule one or more rehearsals. Some teachers start by holding model conferences in which the teacher plays the role of parent and one or another student volunteers to lead the discussion while the rest of the class watches. This is followed by having the students pair off and present their portfolios to each other (Hartmann, 1992) (Multnomah & Beaverton, 1994: 5).

## STUDENTS WRITE THEIR OWN SCRIPT

"Students, on the whole, said they would rather write their own script or abandon it all together" (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996: 67).

## ALLOW STUDENTS TO OWN IT AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

"Put the students in charge of the conference as much as possible. Let them help set up the interview schedule, arrange the room, arrange for parents to bring refreshments, and work out other details. It should be the student's show as much as possible" (Multnomah & Beaverton, 1994: 5).

#### SUGGESTION FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS

"The teachers set up five "stations" in the classroom, each representing one part of the curriculum at the school. The five stations ensure that the young children will talk about curricula the teacher wants covered while reserving for the students as much choice as possible about what to put into their portfolios" (Multnomah & Beaverton, 1994: 6).

#### QUESTIONS PREPARED FOR PARENTS

"Some teachers prepare sample questions that parents can ask their children. Such questions should focus on the child presenting thoughtful explanations rather than rote recall" (Multnomah & Beaverton, 1994: 7).

#### CRITICAL ELEMENT - REFLECTION

All administrators reported that the reflection piece was a critical element in the process of preparing students for SLC. (Tuinstra, Hiatt-Michael, 2004: 71)

#### QUESTIONS RESERVED FOR THE END

"During the conference, the students asked their parents to write any questions they had on an index card and to hold their questions until the end" (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996: 66).

#### 20-30 MINUTES NEEDED (REPORTED BY STUDENTS)

"They (students) said that they needed 20-30 minutes to complete the sessions satisfactorily" (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996: 66).

#### STUDENT REFLECTION

"Another student commented: 'That's the longest time my parent has ever sat down and listened to me'" (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996: 66).

#### TEACHER COMMUNICATION WITH STUDENT ON PROGRESS

"If we are to give students the responsibility of explaining their progress, it is imperative – and only fair – that they know how we evaluated them before the conference" (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996: 67).

#### PARENT RESERVATIONS AND CONCERNS

"Some parents had reservations about the advisor's lack of participation...Parents also viewed this format as discouraging them from discussing problems their child had with a teacher because they didn't want to discuss these kinds of problems in front of their child" (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996: 67).

#### WELCOMED AS ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS

"Students should be welcomed as active participants, facilitating their conferences and sharing their academic progress with their parents and teachers" (Hackmann, 1995: 2).

#### GOALS ESTABLISHED BY FACULTY FOR CONFERENCES

"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" (Hackmann, 1995: 3, 4).

## **BUILDING ANTICIPATION THROUGH PRACTICE**

“Providing an opportunity for practice helps students develop confidence and builds anticipation for the upcoming conference” (Hackmann, 1995: 5).

## **FOSTER A CONVERSATION**

“Another parent concern might surface if students are “over-rehearsed” – that is, they give what appears to be a rote, canned presentation. In preparing for student-led conferences, create an atmosphere that supports conversation between student and parent” (Multnomah & Beaverton, 1994: 3).

# **COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES**

## **COMMUNICATION PROCESS WITH FAMILIES**

“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” (Hackmann, 1995: 5, 6).

## **20 MINUTE SCHEDULING**

“Conferences are scheduled in 20-minute blocks of time during regular school hours and evening hours” (Hackmann, 1995: 6).

## **COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES, INCLUDING HANDWRITTEN INVITE**

“To communicate information to the parents about the new conference format, the team composed a letter, which the students brought home. The school newsletter also featured an article describing the student-led format. Many parents were impressed with their conference invitation, handwritten and delivered by their child” (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996: 65).

## **REQUESTING FOLLOW-UP CONFERENCES**

“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” (Hackmann, 1995: 7).

## **PARENT COMMUNICATION AND HERE’S MY CHILD**

“At College Community, parents receive an informative letter that explains the new process, provides a rationale, highlights new roles and responsibilities, and encourages parents to complete an enclosed questionnaire about their child’s strengths, weaknesses, interests, hobbies, study habits, hopes, dreams, and character traits” (Conderman, Ikan, & Hatcher, 2000: 24).

## **INVITATIONS FROM STUDENTS**

“A week or so ahead, have each child write a letter to the parents inviting them to the conference. Encourage the children to talk about the kinds of things the parents will see” (Anthony, et.al., 1992) (Multnomah & Beaverton, 1994: 2).

## **CONTINUOUS CONVERSTAION ON STUDENT WORK**

"One technique is called 'Two Stars and One Wish.' Every week or so, the student takes home a sheet of paper that tells two positive school experience s (two stars) and one are in which the student is trying to improve ('and a wish'). Parents are asked to respond to the student in writing, being as positive as possible about the 'stars' and as supportive as possible about the 'wishes.'" (Multnomah & Beaverton, 1994: 4).

## **BENEFITS FOR PARENTS, STUDENTS, TEACHERS**

### **CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE INCREASES**

"Conference attendance by parents was 93.1%, an increase from the usual 89-90% attendance rate at traditional parent-teacher conferences" (Hackmann, 1995: 7).

"...94% (of parents) preferred the student-led format over the traditional parent-teacher conference" (Hackmann, 1995: 7).

### **INCREASED PARENT ATTENDANCE**

"Further, parental attendance at conference rose from 35% prior to implementation of student-led conferences to more than 93% during the last few years" (Conderman, Ikan, & Hatcher, 2000: 25).

### **TEACHERS EXPERIENCE MORE SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION**

"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 year" (Hackmann, 1995: 9).

### **REDUCING DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS**

Doing authentic work, creating portfolios, and preparing to dialogue with his/her parents about school work links the student's work to an emotional relationship, and thereby helps reduce discipline problems (Tuinstra, Hiatt-Michael, 2004: 71)

### **DIFFUSING PARENT-TEACHER CONFLICTS**

Student-led conferences appear to diffuse parent-teacher conflicts. When the child takes responsibility for his/her own work and presents that work to parents in a conference, it frees the teacher from having to explain the child's work and the corresponding grades. In the SLC format, the teacher becomes the advocate for the child, one who applauds the student's success and provides a support network for his/her climb to success (Tuinstra, Hiatt-Michael, 2004: 73)

### **FOSTERING A CARING COMMUNITY**

Last but not least, student-led conferences help foster a caring community. The more interplay there is between schools and families, the greater the variety of communication between and among those involved (Tuinstra, Hiatt-Michael, 2004: 74)

## **PORTFOLIOS**

### **OFFERS OF A VARIETY OF PERSPECTIVES**

"Further, because portfolios may include a variety of entries, parents learn about the child's interests, the next steps in teaching, future learning activities that should occur, and what

strategies the student has used to learn and problem solve" (Conderman, Ikan, & Hatcher, 2000: 22).

#### PORTFOLIOS DEMYSTIFY EDUCATION

"Finally, portfolios promote communication between the general and special educator, demystify assessment language, and focus on the process of instruction" (Wesson & King, 1996)(Conderman, Ikan & Hatcher, 2000: 23).

#### INCLUDED CONFERENCE MATERIALS

"The following items are included in the conference materials that are shared among student, parent, and teacher: Goals for Growth Folder, Coat of Arms (student strengths), Student Assignment Notebook , Grade Information, Portfolios, and Thank You Cards" (Hackmann, 1995: 6, 7).

#### CAPTION STRIPS TO COMPLIMENT ARTIFACTS

"...attach caption strips to portfolio items. These strips would include a short description of the activity for which the product was produced, an explanation of why the student selected this item for the portfolio, and a space for a parent's response to the item" (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996: 67).

#### FIVE PORTFOLIO AREAS

"Although many portfolios are arranged around subject areas, we wanted our students to look at their work in relation to our school's five major student outcomes...a literate communicator, a self-directed learner, a complex thinker, an involved citizen, and a collaborative contributor" (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996: 65).

#### SETTING GOALS

"After students have been introduced to the concept of student-led conferences and portfolios, they begin setting academic, social, behavioral, service learning, community involvement, and recreational goals" (Conderman, Ikan, & Hatcher, 2000: 24).

#### STUDENT REFLECTION/EVALUATION

"First, student complete a self-evaluation questionnaire that helps them reflect on their level of preparation, their delivery, and their ability to include the necessary conference components, such as greeting and introducing conference members" (Conderman, Ikan, & Hatcher, 2000: 25).

#### INDIVIDUALIZED STUDENT PLAN

"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" (Hackmann, 1995: 4).

#### NO TWO PORTFOLIOS ARE ALIKE

"Because no two artists are alike, no two portfolios are alike. But each portfolio gives a unique picture of individual skill and growth" (Multnomah & Beaverton, 1994: 2).

#### TELL A STORY

"Thus, the portfolio becomes more than the device that helps tell the story, it becomes part of the process through which the student learns to tell the story of their own learning" (Multnomah & Beaverton, 1994: 3).

## Benefits of Student-Led Conferences

### Students

1. Provides the opportunity to demonstrate academic mastery through performance or product to parents and the school community.
2. Higher test scores
3. Learn to set goals and work towards them
4. Student work becomes more focused
5. Develop presentation skills

### Parents

1. Higher participation
2. Greater appreciation of student progress and understanding of how to help
3. Experience a greater connection with teachers – a relationship based on advocacy for students rather than issues in need of resolution.

### Teachers

1. Declining discipline issues
2. Less stress before and during conferences
3. More supportive communication throughout the year with parents

### Administrators

1. Teachers plan lessons with more intent to promoting standards
2. Communication is enhanced between all stakeholders

## Points of Emphasis

Continuous support of a strong administrator

Focused attention on streamlining paperwork/logistics and dedicated preparation time

Provision of resources and flexible conference scheduling

Capacity must be built throughout the school in implementation

Focus on continuous reflection on the conferences, the preparation of students, the intent of direct instruction, the selection of work samples, and the execution of the conference itself

Emphasis on the “Reflection Piece” with students

## Implementation Suggestions

**Step 1** It is recommended that the administrator and a team of stakeholders read the literature on SLC

**Step 2** It is recommended that the administrator and a team of stakeholders visit schools already using SLC to determine how the administrator can best support the school in SLC implementation

**Step 3** It is recommended that the administrator contract with an educational consultant well-versed in SLC for a minimum of 2 to 3 days of staff development

**Step 4** It is recommended that teachers weave into the curriculum learning opportunities in which students can take a role of responsibility.

The Teaching for Understanding project, supported by the Howard Gardner School of Education at Harvard University, focuses on three key concepts: (a) generative topics, (b) understanding goals, and (c) ongoing assessment

**Step 5** It is recommended that students participate in a values inventory to gain a clearer understanding of what motivates them

**Step 6** It is recommended that teachers help students learn how to set goals for their academic work



based on their assessment of and reflection on their work

- Step 7** It is recommended that teachers explain and post their work expectations in the classroom. It is also recommended that teachers use rubrics and matrices in evaluating student work, and then teach students how to use these tools to evaluate their own work and that of their peers.
- Step 8** It is recommended that parent workshops are developed to prepare parents to participate effectively in SLC. The more prepared all participants are, the more effective the conferences will be. It is also suggested that parent workshops be held each year both for review and for new parent orientation
- Step 9** It is recommended that the student be given the responsibility of formally introducing his/her parents to the teacher before the student-led conference commences. Learning social etiquette helps students gain greater social competence. Social competence helps build a positive classroom community, a finding of the Child Development Project (Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1996).
- Step 10** It is recommended that teachers and administrators invite the broader community to celebrate student academic achievement. This can be accomplished by holding a student achievement celebration week near the end of the school year and by holding student exit interviews for students in their final year of middle school.

A great sample portfolio can be pulled from Center Middle School in Kansas City, Missouri. Having done Student-Led Conferences since 1993, this portfolio structure has become a staple of their conference format.

Materials included in their portfolios include:

**“Goals for Growth Folder”**

Set up as an Individualized Student Plan, this folder features academic, personal responsibility, leadership, community service, and physical/wellness health goals. Progress is recorded through an activity log, which includes tests, assignments, evidence of extracurricular activities, and any academic honors earned.

**“Coat of Arms”**

Describing the skills in which students are succeeding, this personalized shield designed by students promotes their strengths, as well as influential people in their life.

**“Student Assignment Notebook”**

This notebook provides evidence of completed daily assignments, exams, and successes.

**“Grade Information”**

Students indicate their anticipated grades, their actual grades, and their grade goal for the upcoming quarter. Plans for improvement or maintaining grades are also included.

**“Get a Life Portfolio”**

Career guidance information is compiled by students as they explore different professional fields with the assistance of counselors.

**“Academic Portfolio”**

This folder includes all of the student's work samples from the quarter/semester.

**“Thank You Cards”**

At the conclusion of the student's presentation, each parent receives a card created by the student, thanking them for taking part in their conference.