

## **Report Cards & Conferences: Another Barrier or a Challenging Opportunity**

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**Look at most school calendars for the month of February. They say . . .**

**\*End of a Semester; Start of a New One**

**\*Report Cards**

**\*Parent-Student-Teacher Conferences**

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### **About first semester report cards and conferences**

What happens at this point is critical in either cementing or altering teacher, parent, and student relationships. This is an especially crucial time for students who have learning, behavior, or emotional problems. Most data on school depression and suicide attempts show an increase in the spring semester. Is this seasonal pattern linked to the experience of school failure and hopelessness?

*Changing negative patterns and cycles is what support for learning is all about.*

And, school support staff can play a key role in all this by introducing new approaches and partnering with teachers.

***In planning what to do, we need to remember the following:***

>>For some students and their parents, report cards and conferences affirm how well things are going. Students are succeeding; parents are proud; teachers feel successful. (When we talk with teachers in urban districts and poor rural areas, they estimate about 10% fit this category.)

>>For another group of students and parents, the news is a surprise. *Last year's teacher said things were going all right, and we thought that was so this year until we saw these grades.... No one told us.... We were hoping there was time to make up missing work ....*

>>For still others, the report card repeats negative interactions with the school. *My child doesn't do well in school ... the report card only confirms this, and school conferences only make it sound like our fault....*

***Guess which parents don't like to come to school?***

School staff lament:

- C When we have an event for parents at school, only about 10% attend regularly.*
- C The parents with whom we need to connect are the very ones who don't attend conferences and parent events.*

When you differentiate subgroups, you begin to appreciate that the 10% who attend school events on a regular basis are probably the same 10% whose kids are doing well. It shouldn't surprise anyone that those who associate school with negative experiences would avoid such experiences whenever possible. We often quote a noted behavioral intervention specialist who likes to emphasize that ***For every negative encounter you have with a student, you need to have eight positive encounters to restore the balance.*** The same may be true for parents.

### ***The dilemma:***

If a student isn't doing well, parents need to be informed. The problem is how to do it in ways that first and foremost don't alienate the family and hopefully mobilize them to work with the school to make things better. How do we balance a focus on the strengths and assets of students and their families when the report card conveys a negative picture?

## **Rethinking parent conferences**

It's time to rethink end of semester conferences for those students who need support. In redesigning what is done, the objectives are to

- >counter tendencies for students and parents to see the reported grades as a reason to give up
- >enhance student, parent, and staff motivation to do better.

This requires a process that

- >>avoids blaming, defensiveness, anger, frustration
- >>emphasis mutual respect, sharing, and interchange  
(talking *with*, not *at*; discussing, not telling)
- >>involves students and parents in enhancing the understanding of everyone concerned about what can be done to make things better and in planning how to get from here to there .

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## **One New Strategy: Student Led Conferences**

Many schools are recognizing the counterproductive impact of their interactions with parents of students who are not doing well. Student led conferences are an emerging strategy some schools are using in hopes of addressing the problem. Such student-led meetings can be an effective strategy for engaging parents related to counseling, intervention programs, planning for supplementary services, etc. There is a good deal of information on student led conferences.

What follows are adaptations and excerpts from some helpful guidelines developed at the ***Frisbie Middle School in Rialto, CA***

**OBJECTIVES:** The learners will coordinate and conduct student-led conferences with parents/guardians, after selecting portfolio examples, creating formal invitations, scheduling, creating refreshments, controlling the conferences, evaluating the conference and the learning experience; as social skills the students will be instructed in and will practice manners, courtesy, and etiquette.

The learner will select appropriate portfolio examples from each academic area reflecting growth over the year; create a formal invitation to parents/guardians to attend the conference; rehearse the conduct of the conference with peers; conduct the student-led conference with teacher-observers; instructed in and will practice manners, courtesy, and etiquette; and, create and mail a formal Thank You note at the conference completion.

### Sample Letter:

Dear Parents/Guardians:

The students will be holding student-led conferences. These conferences will provide an opportunity for your students to reflect upon their successes during the year and to provide you with examples of what they have learned in each of the academic areas. We emphasize that these are student-led conferences and the teachers will be attending as observers, but not as active participants.

The students will be scheduling these conferences during school hours, or immediately after school, arranging for any necessary equipment and refreshments, preparing formal invitations, and conducting the meetings. We view this as an extremely positive opportunity for these students to emphasize their strengths, acknowledge their weaknesses, and, with you in attendance, plan for their approach to the next semester. Please make every effort to be part of this conference. This is an opportunity to open up or improve lines of communication with your students about their education. We strongly encourage you to be a positive part of this conferencing process.

While specific dates and times are not yet established, it would assist us greatly if you could acknowledge your willingness and availability for this unique process. Please return the bottom portion of this letter.

Thank you,

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\_\_\_\_\_ I am interested and willing to attend the student-led conference.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am not interested in attending the student-led conference.

(Please Check Appropriate Response)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Student's First And Last Name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Parent/Guardian Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

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### **Student-Led Conference AGENDA**

1. Meet and greet parents/guardians at the door; escort them to their seat; hold chair as appropriate.
2. Ask parents/guardians if they would like refreshments; serve refreshments.
3. Review the conduct of the conference and the Agenda with parents/guardians; request that questions be held until the completion of the conference.
4. Present and discuss the Conference Portfolio; identify each of the selected projects from each of the academic areas.
5. Present and discuss the "How I See Myself" evaluation form.
6. Ask parents/guardians if they have any questions/comments; present Conference Portfolio to them.
7. Excuse and thank parents/guardians for their attendance; escort them to the door.

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### **Student-Led Conference Checklist**

Check off, or get a peer or teacher to check off as appropriate, as you complete each requirement. This will insure that nothing is forgotten or overlooked:

#### **Prior To The Student-Led Conference**

- ☐ Make certain that parent/guardian has returned Parent Interest Letter.
- ☐ Make certain that parent/guardian has returned Scheduling Letter.
- ☐ Retrieve at least two (2) portfolio items from each academic area.
- ☐ Complete at least one (1) Work Evaluation form in each academic area.
- ☐ Complete "How I See Myself" self-evaluation form.
- ☐ Review teacher-provided Conference Agenda.
- ☐ Create and mail formal Parent/Guardian Invitation Letter.
- ☐ Complete instruction in manners, courtesy and etiquette.
- ☐ Create, arrange for, or provide refreshments for the actual conference.
- ☐ Complete rehearsals for actual conference.
- ☐ Conducting the Student-Led Conference
- ☐ Check arrangement of materials and room prior to conference.
- ☐ Meet, greet and seat parents/guardians.
- ☐ Offer and serve refreshments.
- ☐ Review Conference Agenda with parents/guardians.
- ☐ Present and discuss Conference Portfolio.
- ☐ Present and discuss "How I See Myself" form.
- ☐ Ask parents for questions or comments.
- ☐ Excuse and thank parents/guardians for attendance.

After The Student-Led Conference: (1) Complete Post Conference Student Reflection form; (2) Complete and mail formal Thank You note to parents/guardians; (3) Submit completed Student-Led Conference checklist to teacher.

## **How Do I See Myself?**

Give yourself a: 1 for NEVER, a 2 for SELDOM, a 3 for FREQUENTLY or a 4 for ALWAYS.

### *Quality Producer*

- I work successfully as a team member
- I produce quality projects, assignments or performances.
- I use materials effectively and appropriately.
- I met due dates/deadlines.
- I go above and beyond.

### *Effective Communicator*

- I effectively communicate thoughts and ideas.
- I make positive contributions to lessons/discussions.
- I deal with problems, arguments or fights in a positive way.

### *Life-Long Learner*

- I know who to ask for help and information.
- I know how to find and use a variety of resources.
- I am flexible and creative when necessary.

### *Responsible Citizen*

- I demonstrate personal responsibility for attitude, actions, words and work.
- I follow rules and directions.
- I make a positive contribution to the classroom and community.
- I demonstrate respect and understanding for myself and others.

### *Perceptive Thinker*

- I demonstrate knowledge and interest in the world and current events.
- I use knowledge and creativity to solve problems.
- I think beyond the obvious.

### *Self-Directed Individual*

- I show maturity and responsibility by making healthy, safe and wise choices.
- I set goals and follow through with them.
- I start work, stay on task and complete the assignment without being reminded or prompted.

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### **Student-Led Conference Evaluation Form**

1. I used an introduction
2. I provided relevant background information and sources.
3. I support my interpretation or position by providing examples, evidence, quotations, personal experience
4. I explain how my examples or other evidence support my claims by using words such as: shows, demonstrates, proves, supports, or illustrates.
5. My supporting evidence provides the main part of my presentation
6. A part where I need more information or I needed to use more examples or evidence is:
7. Other revisions or changes I might make if I could do the conference over:

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### **Other Post Conference Student Reflections**

1. My conference went well because.....
2. The best part about my conference was.....
3. One of the difficult things about my conference was.....
4. For my next conference, I need to remember to.....
5. One of the positive things that I feel that I have learned during the conference process was:
6. One of the positive things that I feel that my parents/guardians learned about me was:

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\*\*\*\*\***If you want to know more about student led conferences see:**

*Student-Led Conferences at the Middle Level*

ERIC Digest <http://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu/eece/pubs/digests/1997/hackma97.html>

The Highs and Lows of Parent-Teacher Conferences

[Http://www.middleweb.com/CSLV2TchrConf.html](http://www.middleweb.com/CSLV2TchrConf.html)

Letting Students Lead Parent Conferences

<http://www.naesp.org/comm/mm98b.htm>