
STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES

West Carrollton Middle School

West Carrollton, Ohio

To increase student achievement and to facilitate interaction between students and their parents and teachers, a team of teachers at West Carrollton Middle School instituted student-led conferences organized around student portfolios. Many schools face the challenge of achieving high attendance at traditional parent-teacher conferences. However, schools organizing student-led conferences tend to experience an increase in conference attendance as parents enjoy having this time with their children, seeing samples of their children's work, and hearing the descriptions their son or daughter gives for particular assignments. There is some research to support that student discussions with parents regarding academics is one of the best predictors of student achievement compared with other family involvement practices.

Starting at the beginning of the school year, teachers guide students to organize their portfolios. Portfolios must contain samples of work from all five core classes and work from other classes such as art, computer science, and music. The portfolio also contains students' awards and other important papers as well as reflection sheets that the student and teacher have completed for each class. Students rate their current performance and have the opportunity to write comments and to set goals for the next quarter. During the student-led conferences, students discuss with their parents how their personal assessments compare to each teacher's, thus actively taking responsibility for their own education.

Student-led conferences have received much support from the school administration. In the fall of 2000, the building principal highlighted student-led conferences by emceeding a live presentation with a team of teachers on this topic on the local Miami Valley cable station. The principals have worked into the schedule a daily integrated studies period during which students create portfolios and practice student-led conferences. During conferences, administrators help work out the logistics of holding eight conferences simultaneously. Ultimately, this new conference style meets the school's site plan which addresses portfolios, student-led conferences, parent involvement, and student achievement.

During the fall of 1999, 76.1% of the students participated in student-led conferences as compared to 27.8% traditional conferences held building-wide. After looking at results from the fall conferences, the team attempted to pair students who had little demonstrated home support with secretaries, counselors, administrators, and non-team teachers who volunteered to

conference with these students. As a result, participation in student-led conferences increased overall. As another means of evaluating effectiveness, parents completed post-conference surveys after the fall conferences. Sixty-two percent of these forms were returned. Forty-nine of the parents conferenced at school (53%), and 44 (47%) parents conferenced at home. Ninety out of the ninety-three parent surveys stated they were willing to participate again in student-led conferences. Students also evaluated the new conference method. Seventy percent of the students indicated they would participate in student-led conferences again if given the opportunity.

Without question, the benefits of student-led conferences are numerous. The students learn to take ownership of their progress. By using their portfolios to compare first quarter with second, or second with third, a clear picture of achievement emerges. Students feel proud of their performance in the conferences. Students agree these types of conferences empower them. They feel respected by their teachers and parents. Parents benefit by having a time set aside with their child to talk about school, brainstorming with their child on solutions and action plans, seeing more student work than they normally do, and feeling more at ease in the school setting. When conferences are held at school, parents get a chance to talk with teachers and observe them in many roles: facilitator, child advocate, supporter, and mediator. Student-led conferences are one way for students to play a major role in building partnerships between the school and the family.

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