

Making Parent-Teacher Conferences Parent-Friendly

*Birchwood Elementary School
Birchwood, Tennessee*

“It has been two years since I have had an irate phone call after report cards were distributed,” said the principal. “This is an astonishing accomplishment!” The positive change at Birchwood Elementary School has evolved since restructuring parent conference days. With support from Chattanooga’s Public Education Foundation (PEF), the school improved conferences to establish a welcoming atmosphere and involve all parents in a dialog concerning their children.

PEF and Birchwood staff formed a committee to design a conference process that would reach all families, encourage parent participation in student progress, and prioritize conferences as a useful communication tool. PEF provided staff development for teachers on effective conferencing methods.

Teachers designed an outline to use during conferences to keep discussions targeted on important issues relating to the curriculum and student. The committee further enhanced evening conferences by adding refreshments, childcare, and student guides. Administration and office staff also arranged for a faculty dinner on the conference night. Teachers sent home sign-up sheets in Monday Envelopes for conferences and placed phone calls if a response was not received. Reminder postcards were sent out about 10 days in advance of Conferencing Week. The committee also sent parents a conference guide that explained what would be discussed and suggested questions parents might ask.

During conference night, upper grade students assisted parents to the classrooms. Teachers put candy mints on the conference

tables to set a welcoming tone. Senior Neighbor partners ran a snack area with treats from Coca-Cola Company and Little Debbie. After conferences, parents completed a survey to offer input into the conference process.

Parents were provided a large window of time for conferences to allow for differing work schedules and to promote attendance by fathers. Some parents responded that they could not attend the evening of scheduled conferences, so teachers held conferences prior to the date to accommodate their schedules. By the conference night, a number of parents had already spoken with teachers. Additional time was allowed during the week following the conferences. Those parents not able to physically attend a conference at school were encouraged to set up a phone conference.

After Conference Week, teachers completed exit surveys and turned in conference lists. PEF assisted in the school’s follow-up study by recording parent and teacher responses on their exit surveys and graphing attendance numbers. Responses were overwhelmingly favorable and very helpful.

Birchwood Elementary School has used this method of parent conferencing for five years. The first Conference Week brought a sharp increase in parent participation. With two conference weeks per year, Birchwood faculty members have had 100% participation in family conferences for the last five consecutive events.

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