Conferences have increased in importance and value as a means of translating the work of the school to the home. Virginia Hufstedler, guidance director, Corpus Christi Public Schools, Tex., calls attention to some barriers which may still operate in planning effective conferences, but also suggests guides to self-appraisal by teachers, students, and parents, as well as appraisal of each other.

ONE OF THE FUNDAMENTAL steps in all educational programs is the evaluation of pupil progress. This evaluation is necessary for future planning just as planning is essential for functional education. Both planning and evaluation are provinces of the student, parent, and teacher, and in order for them to be done effectively, both steps should be the result of their combined efforts. When the teacher evaluates the progress of the student without the help of the parent and student himself, he may place too much emphasis on academic aspects of work and lose sight of the goals the family holds for the child. If a parent attempts to judge his child's progress without consulting the pupil and the instructor, he may be unaware of the school's goals and philosophy. The student himself needs the counsel and help of these two adults, who are in a position to know best his needs, assets, and liabilities. Since the student is the most important of these elements, parent-student and teacher-student conferences are equally important in evaluation.
Parent-teacher conferences serve as a useful method of evaluating pupil progress. By conference we mean specified time spent in discussing and studying a problem or situation. It is time spent by parent and teacher in discussing progress the student is making and planning more effective experiences for him. Parent-teacher conferences are not to be considered as the only evaluation technique, but merely as part of a general conference program.

J. Paul Leonard says, “Evaluation is a consideration of how effective a given program is in stimulating growth toward the objectives set up by pupils and their leaders.”¹ In accepting this definition, we are thinking of more than the results of a testing program and grades or marks that the school sends home to the parents. We are considering aims and goals that have been set for the student and are looking for evidence of growth and development that has resulted from experiences planned for him. We are seeking strengths and weaknesses both of the student and the educational program in order to be able to plan more effectively for the student.

In early history of education in America, conference time was not an essential part of a teacher’s daily program. The community in which the teacher taught was small and he knew intimately the families of his students. He took a part of his salary by boarding in the home of first one and then another of his pupils. He saw parents of other students frequently and had repeated opportunity to discuss each child’s progress in informal situations.

This situation is true of few, if any, of our present schools. In order to meet this need of establishing parent-teacher contacts, many school administrators are setting up daily schedules to include a conference period for each teacher. This is done because in cities instructors may live miles from communities in which they teach. Homes of the students, on the other hand, usually center around the school they attend. This gives little or no opportunity for social contact between teachers and parents. This pattern of living makes scheduled conference time a necessity in our present day schools.

The Teacher Has Fears

Although time is allotted for such conferences and educators are in agreement as to their importance, present results show too little benefit is derived from them. For such a conference to be successful and worthwhile, both parent and teacher must be prepared to work together.

Let us imagine that we are Miss Jones, a new teacher in East High School. Miss Jones has always graded on the “curve,” a system which showed her a prescribed number of A’s, B’s, C’s, D’s, and F’s. In the last faculty meeting, the principal of East High School had urged his teachers to minimize failures. In his opinion, low marks meant failure on the part of teachers instead of students. Despite many after-school hours, special assignments, and individual help for laggard students, Miss Jones felt her work ineffectual. She still had failures and low marks.

Miss Jones is in the lounge pondering how marks are to be determined in East High School. A note arrives from

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the principal. It is the request for a conference from Mrs. Cox, mother of one of the students. Miss Jones checks Jane's record. The girl is passing, but Miss Jones feels that she is not yet familiar enough with her students to really judge any of them fairly. Besides it is the end of the day, Miss Jones' blouse is rumpled and she is due at the beauty shop that very afternoon for a long overdue shampoo. At such times parents often appear and teachers have no forewarning. Mrs. Cox meets a teacher who is tired, frightened, and on the defensive.

Parents Worry, Too

But Miss Jones is not alone in her fears. Parents have them too. Mr. Brown, a successful business man, is in his office. His associates speak of him as a "self-made man." The telephone rings. It is the principal of East High School asking Mr. Brown for a conference concerning his son.

Mr. Brown's education ended with the seventh grade when a teacher told him he "needn't come back until he could behave himself." Mr. Brown didn't go back. Of course, his extrovert behavior, which "riled" the teacher, has been an asset in the business world. Yet, he perhaps still carries some guilt feelings concerning his unorthodox departure from school.

Mr. Brown recalls a conference with the principal when Jack was in the fourth grade. There was talk about maturity, intelligence quotient, grade level and several other "high sounding" terms. Not understanding this professional jargon, Mr. Brown felt the principal was trying to tell him Jack was "dumb." Remembering these experiences, his mind now reels with questions: "Is Jack as smart as he should be? Have we done everything we should for Jack? Should I have sent Jack to camp, as his mother insisted? Do Jack's teachers dislike him? Why aren't they fair to him? Or is he really dumb?" In this frame of mind, Mr. Brown will arrive at school belligerent and ill at ease.

What benefit will Jane and Jack derive from conferences prefaced by these feelings? Such emotions on the part of Miss Jones and Mr. Brown are not uncommon to conferences that take place today. In thinking only of themselves both parent and teacher have overlooked the student and his problem. Because of this approach each was made to recall past unpleasant experiences which now color his thinking and obscure his reason. These feelings could have been avoided if parent and school had worked closely together in previous years.

Planning on the part of educators can result in successful interviews between parents and teachers. These preparations should include regularly scheduled time for conferences, invitations to parents to visit school, and special efforts to make parents feel welcome and familiar with school routines. Such planning would result in good parent-school relationships which tend to prevent unpleasant conferences regardless of the topic.

Encourage Rapport Early

Ideally, the pattern of parent-teacher as well as teacher-pupil relationships should be set when the child enters school for the first time. If the teacher and mother can become friends, they will find a common interest in Johnny
or Sue, and much can be done by way of evaluating the progress, development, and behavior of the child.

All such conferences cannot and should not be at school. Many mothers work away from home and are unable to visit the teacher during her conference period. Others have small children who cannot be left at home while the mother visits school. Planning on the part of administrators can make it possible for teachers to visit in the home at the mother's convenience. Many principals make arrangements for children in the lower grades to attend school only half day for the first few weeks of the session. The other half day is devoted to home visitation.

Educators are prone to say that every parent should be interested enough to come to school to inquire about his child's progress. Parents have a right to feel that each teacher should be interested enough in her students to want to know them better through their families.

**Mutual Barriers Exist**

Psychologists tell us that rivalry often exists between teacher and mother. It is easy to understand how the woman who brings her child to school for the first time could feel that she has a rival in the teacher. Her child has been at home for the first six years of his life and now he shares the time between the home and school. On the other hand, psychologists point out that teachers are often liable to resent mothers because they seemingly have all the things in life that most women want—a husband, children, and a home.

The difference in educational backgrounds that exists between teachers and parents can be another element which hinders the establishing of rapport. The fact that parents of many children in public schools are not college trained people may make them feel ill at ease around teachers. Some teachers have capitalized on this inadequacy on the part of parents to compensate for their own feelings of inferiority because of low salaries and lack of social acceptance.

Control of relations between teachers and parents rests primarily in the hands of the school and especially of the teacher herself. She needs to accept the parent as a person, to welcome her into the classroom, and to share mutually their interest in the child.

Evaluation through parent-teacher conferences increases in worth as both parents and teachers are accustomed to working together, as they take place regularly and systematically, and as both parties are made to feel secure.

The child benefits from evaluation by means of parent-teacher conferences because the agencies most interested in him, the home and the school, are brought together. The teacher has the scientific principles of child development and the mother supplies the actual facts about Johnny. The exchange is a fair one and a better understanding of Johnny results both at school and home. The student receives help from this combination in appraising his progress, and plans for his future can be made with him that will serve his needs.