

## Students Belong in the "Parent-Teacher" Conference, Too

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The name alone, *parent-teacher conference*—and certainly the practice—exclude from the process its primary constituent—the student. But it is the *student's* academic performance, attitude, work habits, and social interaction that are being scrutinized, analyzed, and theorized about. Simply for the sake of fairness, students should play an active role in the parent-teacher conference.

At Elbow Park Elementary School in Calgary, Alberta, we decided to include students in our March reporting period conferences. This idea, when first proposed, had attracted strong support by parents in the community. To prepare for the conferences, both teachers and parents first attended inservice sessions. Then teachers oriented their students by discussing the conference format and answering questions. Many teachers had their students write questions to ask during the conference. For example, students were curious about "marks" (codes) on the report card and about the reporting process in general.

All students from K-6 had the opportunity to participate in the conferences. The meetings were scheduled for 30 minutes each with the understanding that arrangements could be made for an additional "private" meeting between parents and teachers if either party desired it. Such an arrangement occurred in only one or two cases.

Later when teachers and parents (with their children's input) completed questionnaires, we found an overall positive feeling about the benefits of including students in the conferences and general agreement that the procedure should be continued. Everyone agreed that including students in the conferences is an effective way to get students to exercise more ownership of and responsibility for their learning.

Parents said they gained valuable insights into the relationship between the teacher and their child. They also expressed an appreciation for the open, honest communication, suggesting that, with all participants present, misunderstandings were kept at a minimum. Not having to relay teachers' concerns, comments, or suggestions to their children was also mentioned as a benefit of the conferences. As one parent put it: "It was helpful for Michael to hear his teacher's comments first-hand."

For those schools wishing to embark on such a rewarding project, the following recommendations may prove helpful.

1. As a staff, clearly define the purpose of including students in the conference period, and be prepared to convince others of its value.
2. Gain the support of parents and senior administrators for this endeavor, as additional time for conferences may be required.
3. Maintain open communication with parents about the new format for conferences, and offer them the option of having a conference that includes the student. Don't mandate anything!
4. Discuss the purpose of this format with students, and work with them to develop questions they may want to ask.
5. Prepare for each conference by developing questions that will actively involve both students and parents in the conversation.
6. Evaluate the conference, and seek input from all participants in the interest of making improvements.

Including students in the traditional parent-teacher conference was a worthwhile endeavor for the staff, students, and parents of the Elbow Park School community. Perhaps it can work for you, too.

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ended questions. Good question: "What does Carla say about her school activities?" Poor question: "Has Carla mentioned what we are now doing in school?" Rather than taking notes, they should listen carefully, ask for clarification, and pose questions to direct the discussion toward relevant topics.

Teachers should avoid negative or emotionally laden questions, such as "Does Sammy still refuse to do his homework?" Instead, they should try: "How does Sammy feel about homework?" The first question elicits little information and may cause the parent to feel defensive. The second question requires more than a "yes" or "no" response, allows parents to share perceptions about the topic, and may lead the teacher to providing suggestions.

By obtaining information *before* providing it, teachers give parents a chance to share their knowledge about their child. The teacher can gain insight into parental expectations, insight helpful both in the conference and in working with the child.

*Providing information.* Next the teacher can focus on offering suggestions for enhancing the child's learning. If rapport is not strong, if emotions are running high, or the conference has reached an impasse, the teacher should weigh the next step. One option is to close the conference and reschedule it in hopes of being more successful at another time. Another is to complete the conference as well as possible, expecting little if

**A reflective statement usually results in the parent's providing more helpful information.**

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