Student-led conferences: a better way

Beverly A. Maronn

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Student-led conferences: a better way

Abstract
The purpose of this journal article is to inform teachers and administrators of a better way to conduct student-led conferences. The typical format is to hold these conferences in a small, advisory setting. This paper describes an alternative format, a "homeroom" arrangement, in which one teacher is available to facilitate the conferences of 12-20 students. The staff at Harlan Community Middle School has found that a large group, everybody together-type setting works better. The gym/commons/media center location alleviates many of the problems associated with the small group setting.
STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES: A BETTER WAY

A Graduate Journal Article
Submitted to the
Division of Middle Level Education
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

By
Beverly A. Maronn
July 2000
This Journal Article by: Beverly A. Maronn

Titled: Student-Led Conferences: A Better Way

Has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education

8-11-00
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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my husband, Dennis, and children, Shelby, Sydney, and Matt for their constant support throughout my program of advanced study. Without their love and encouragement I could never have reached this goal.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this paper to my parents:

“Pete” Ramer 1/29/21 to 3/4/99
Fonda Ramer 12/26/29 to 5/26/88

And, my brother:

Kenneth Ramer 11/20/51 to 5/27/99

“Thank you for always believing in me...”
Abstract

The purpose of this journal article is to inform teachers and administrators of a better way to conduct student-led conferences. The typical format is to hold these conferences in a small, advisory setting. This paper describes an alternative format, a "homeroom" arrangement, in which one teacher is available to facilitate the conferences of 12-20 students. The staff at Harlan Community Middle School has found that a large group, everybody together-type setting works better. The gym/commons/media center location alleviates many of the problems associated with the small group setting.
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STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES: A BETTER WAY

Chapter 1

Educators are continually looking for ways to improve communication between school, parent, student, and teacher (Rutherford & Billig, 1995). There is also an increasing need to make the student more accountable for his/her learning (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996). There is a way to accomplish much of this by implementing a new style of conference, the student-led conference. A student-led conference is a meeting between student and parent where the student is the teacher at the conference and the teacher plays an auxiliary role.

Several key components are addressed in this article:

- What are the reasons for switching to the student-led conference format?
- How to implement student-led conferences into your building?
- What is the best way to incorporate portfolios into the conference?
- What is the most comfortable setting to hold these conferences?

At Harlan Community Middle School teachers and administration made the decision to switch to student-led conferences in the fall of 1996. Prior to the spring of 1997, we held the traditional type of conference in which the parents came to the school and stood in line to meet with each teacher. Our building houses sixth, seventh, and eighth grades with an enrollment of approximately 450 students and a certified staff of thirty teachers. In our first experiences with student-led conferences, using a variety of settings, we heard the same recurring comment from parents, “I didn’t get to meet with all the teachers.”
This article relates the history of the student-led conference at Harlan Community Middle School and the trial and error process of looking for the "perfect" format for these conferences. Our experiences have brought us to the A.T. (all together) Conference. The A.T. Conference is structured so that all grade level conferences take place in a large area with all grade level teachers present, visible, and easily accessible to parents. This scenario for conferencing allows for each teacher to make contact with each student and parent.
References


Chapter 2

Student-Led Conferences: A Better Way
STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES: A BETTER WAY

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STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES: A BETTER WAY

The purpose of this journal article is to inform teachers and administrators of an alternative way to conduct student-led conferences. While the typical format is to hold these conferences in a small, advisory setting, the staff at Harlan Community Middle School has found that a large group setting works better. The gym/commons/media center location alleviates many of the problems associated with the small group setting.

Why Student-Led Conferences

As we in education constantly strive to make the learning process meaningful, a natural extension of that process is for the student to take an active roll in the conference process. The young adolescent in the middle school years is going through a transition period of physical and emotional change. Schools need to encourage this move toward independence in controlled avenues for success. Students should be encouraged to take part in the decision-making process of their education. Taking part in the decision-making also means taking on greater responsibility for the learning process. "During a student-led conference, students accept responsibility for their own performance in each class by articulating and demonstrating their progress, goals, and areas of accomplishment." (Culver & Cousino, 2000, p.13). Who better to explain the why's and how's of a project or assignment than the person responsible for its completion? It really is the only sensible way to conduct conferences.
History

"I didn’t get to talk to all of Michael’s teachers." "I talk to Sarah all the time, I want to talk to her teachers." These are some of the comments we heard after our first two experiences implementing student-led conferences. At the time of our initial student led conferences, we were in an old, traditional “factory style” building. Our building had three academic stories and a basement where the gym and locker rooms were located. Our maiden voyage into the world of student-led conferences was in the spring of 1997. Our team of seventh grade teachers included five core teachers (English, literature, mathematics, social studies, and science) and one special education teacher. We spread out in our respective rooms on all three floors of our building and held conferences with our homeroom students and their parents. Although we encouraged parents to roam the building, very few sought out other teachers and we received comments like the ones above verbally and on evaluation forms. We had over a 90% attendance rate, but our team was not satisfied that we had the best structure for conferences.

Still very committed to the student-led conference format, the next fall we decided on a central location -- the third floor of the building. Four members of the team were using other teachers’ rooms, but we were all visible and approachable by all the parents who attended conferences. This change still did not meet our expectations of this new style of conferencing – even with a high (90+%) attendance rate. We did not feel comfortable in other teachers’ rooms and the third floor location was prohibitive to some parents (no elevator – only a chair lift for handicapped accessibility). Feeling that we could do a better job of serving our students and parents, we discussed and discarded several ideas for the next conference. Our principal suggested holding all the conferences...
together in the basement gym. Although we viewed this idea as a punishment it provided
a more accessible location for parents and we agreed to give it a try.

A Better Format

The school custodians helped us set up ten “conferencing” tables in the gym, one
“supply” table for portfolios, and a small table for the coffeepot and cookies. Our plan
for an All-Together (A.T.) Conference was simple: schedule ten student-parent
conferences at the same time in twenty-minute intervals; give the students a chance to go
over portfolio material with their parents; and each teacher would circulate around the
gym stopping briefly at each table.

Our overall time frame for conferences was 5:00 PM to 8:30 PM. By breaking
this into twenty-minute time slots we were able to give parents a choice of a time to
schedule their conference that was convenient to them. We also built into our-time plan
breaks when no conferences were scheduled to accommodate parents who either had no
scheduled time or who came at a time other than when they were scheduled. When
arriving for the conference, students would pick up their portfolio from the supply table
and escort their parents to an empty table. Following an individual, prearranged plan, the
students would go over the documents in their portfolios with their parents. As the
teachers circulated around the gym, brief stops were made at each table - sometimes for
a simple introduction, greeting, “everything is OK”, or in a few cases a short sit-down
conversation. Afterward our seventh grade team embraced the A.T. Conference style
wholeheartedly! This arrangement allowed us to meet with each parent in attendance –
and to let each parent meet us.
According to numbers compiled by the Iowa Department of Education for the 1998-1999 school year, 96% of the middle level schools in Iowa are 5-8, 6-8, or 7-8 grade configurations (Iowa Department of Education, 2000). Most schools have three large group areas where this set-up would work well. When we moved into our new building in the fall of 1998, our classrooms were arranged in three academic pods (sixth, seventh and eighth). Our seventh grade team immediately requested the gym for our conferences. We now have the luxury of a public address system to play soft background music during our conference times.

The Portfolio

A portfolio of student selected material is the cornerstone of student-led conferences. A generally accepted definition of a portfolio “is a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of student achievement or growth” (Henderson & Wilcox, 1998). The student-led conference helps students build self-esteem and pride through the portfolio process and culminates in sharing the portfolio with other family members. The responsibility for accumulating, organizing and presenting the portfolio documents rests primarily with the student. The very structure of the student-led conference promotes student accountability, responsibility, independence and ownership.

Attendance at student led conferences at our middle school has been much better than the traditional type of “wait-in-line” conference. With a set appointment time, parents know that the conference experience will not last for three hours moving from one teacher’s line to the next. Having an appointment time to sit down and discuss academic successes with a son or daughter is one of the biggest selling points of the student-led conference – no waiting in line after line to meet with teachers. With the
appointment schedule they can be in and out in as little as a half and hour. We consistently average over 95% attendance at fall and spring student-led conferences. Traditionally we experienced a 70% - 80% attendance at fall conferences, but dropped to 25%-30% attendance at spring conferences. We feel the reason for the high percentage attendance is three-fold: scheduled appointments, the student accountability and the time the students have invested in their portfolios encourages parents to attend.

Our A.T. conference style has an additional bonus. While many parents are coming and going from the gym throughout the afternoon or evening, they have a chance to visit with one another. This lends an atmosphere of community to our conferences. It is not uncommon to hear families arrange to go to a local restaurant for a meal or dessert after conferences.

Conference Preparation

The overall structure of our student-led conferences follows the same format as many other schools. Students begin preparation by collecting examples of work for each core subject and exploratory classes (art, music, drama, vocational agriculture, careers). This collection of work is refined throughout the academic period for inclusion into a student portfolio to be shared with parents at conferences. Teachers also select two documents in each core subject for the portfolio. Included with certain selected documents in the portfolio is a reflection sheet that the student fills out. The one we use is very simple: “Something I feel I did very well on this assignment/test/project is” and “Something I could have done to improve this assignment/test/project is.” Also in the portfolio are some “personality” type questionnaires. These work very well as
icebreakers for the shy or nervous student having trouble getting started with a conference.

Within our advisory groups we go through proper etiquette for the conference night, how to organize the contents of the portfolio and rehearse with a partner acting as the parent. Feeling comfortable with what and how this evidence of student learning will be shared goes a long way toward a successful conference.

It has been our experience from responses on questionnaires that although within some families there is communication about grades and what's going on at school, the conversation during a conference is really a different kind of communication. The student is not simply telling a parent, "We took a social studies test today and I did okay," or "My homework is all caught up and turned in - can I go over to Matt's?" The student is speaking directly about specific documents and using his/her own words explaining the document. Feeling comfortable with what and how this evidence of student learning will be shared goes a long way toward a successful conference.

**Conference Night**

We schedule ten conferences at a time in twenty minute intervals with built in "breaks" throughout a time frame of three and one-half hours. Students enter the gym with their parents, go to a "supply" table, pick up their portfolio and show their parents to an empty table. An easy way for us to keep track of attendance and scheduled times is a sheet of poster board for each night of conferences. The poster is divided into time blocks and students' names are recorded as conferences are scheduled. We hang this on the wall near the "supply" table and check the names off as portfolios are picked up. This
gives our principal and us an idea at a glance about the attendance at conferences. The poster also makes the conferences report to the administration easily managed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MONDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5:00-5:20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Doe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue Jones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam Smith ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:20-5:40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:40-6:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:00-6:20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:20-6:40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not scheduled for conferences:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One might think that ten conferences being conducted at the same time would be loud and annoying, but with soft music playing in the background and the individual interest in each student's work, conversations are not overheard nor does one conversation interfere with another. All grade level teachers are present and visible, and one-by-one, as each individual conference begins to wind down, teachers circulate: we go to the parents, the parents don’t have to wait in lines to see us! Sometimes we sit and visit about particular concerns, but often the student has done such a wonderful job of accounting for his/her academics, we need only to introduce ourselves, greet the parents, and thank them for coming! Often near the end of the conference parents can be overheard asking questions such as, “So, what is your plan for science next quarter,” or “What do you think you can do about your behavior in math class?” The student led conference is the perfect time for students and parents to review academic and/or
behavior goals previously made and to look to the future and make goals for the next academic period. Our teachers have also found that the student led conference times are excellent opportunities to remind parents of upcoming deadlines for projects or assignments, a spot check on the use of planners (assignment notebooks), and notices of library fines, overdue lunch accounts or supplies needed for school.

**Post-Conference**

By using the poster boards to keep track of attendance at conferences, it makes it very easy to determine who did not attend conferences either night. There are several ways to deal with no-shows:

- A phone call to the parents from the advisor-teacher to say, “Hey, we missed you at conferences, when can we schedule a time for you to come in and go over Sara’s portfolio with her?”

- Occasionally the “teacher part” of the conference can be conducted over the phone. One teacher represents the rest of the core teachers for an informal report of behavior and academics, then with the parents’ permission we send the student’s portfolio home with the student so student and parent can have time together at home to discuss the contents. Many times the parent will send a note back to school with the student indicating a successful conference.

- Unfortunately, there are some parents (thankfully very few) who express no interest in coming to school to conference, and who will not take the time to sit with their student at home and go over the portfolio. When the student has invested so much time into the portfolio, having an adult to talk to is so vital. Here, our staff helps each other out. A sixth grade teacher may sit and listen to a seventh grader’s conference.
We have had students give their conferences to the principal, the guidance counselor, even one of the office secretaries!

Another part of the post-conference time is the evaluation process. The first several times we held student-led conferences we had a short form that parents were asked to fill out before they left school. The questions were simple:

1. Was the time allowance sufficient for your conference?
   Yes    No, too short    No, too long    No opinion

2. I gained information about my student that was helpful.
   Yes    No    No opinion

3. My student and I thought this conference was a positive experience.
   Yes    No    No opinion

4. The location/set-up was comfortable and convenient.
   Yes    No    No opinion

5. I would prefer the following format for conferences next year:
   Fall traditional/Spring student led
   Fall traditional/Spring traditional
   Fall student led/Spring student led

Comments:

Not all parents took the time to respond, but enough did for us to get an idea of the direction our parents wanted us to go. By the time we had settled on our gym-located A.T. Conference format, 53% of the parents responding did so with such enthusiasm, we received comments such as: “I enjoyed the student-led conference and the teachers being available if we needed them.” “Really liked having this in the gym.” “Student led focus.
is helpful to place student in forefront of evaluation and stresses the importance of conferences and monitoring progress.” “Giving my student the responsibility of sharing information with parents is a skill that will build the relationship and improve communication.” We discontinued collecting surveys last year. There didn’t seem to be a need – our public had spoken.

Conclusion

Too often the word “change” is met with resistance, or at the very least hesitation, but making the change from the traditional, wait-in-line conferences to student-led conferences is worth the time and effort for students, parents, and teachers. By hosting A.T. Conferences parents, family, students, and teachers can come together in a real sense of community. Parents have the opportunity to greet one another and/or introduce themselves to each other. Coming together as a community committed to doing what’s best for all our children and celebrating the things that happen in middle school are the cornerstones of middle level philosophy (National Middle School Association, 1995).

The student-led conference is only one part of the educational process, but an important one. This format gives educators a chance to be proactive with parents in establishing lines of communication and encouraging students and parents to work together to establish realistic and attainable academic and personal goals. By teaching our young people to be responsible and giving them the tools they need to be intelligent communicators, we will have given them valuable tools for their future and ours. As we embark on our path through the 21st century, no matter how the face of the educational process changes, students will always have work they will be accountable for and parents
will want to know how their students are doing in our schools. The A.T. Conference, truly, is the absolute, best venue for sharing this information. Change is good.
REFERENCES


Iowa Department of Education. (1999-2000). *Basic Education Data Survey (BEDS).* Des Moines, IA: Author.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


Appendix A

Author's Guideline's
Middle School Journal

Editorial Policy and Guidelines for Authors

Middle School Journal, a refereed journal, is an official publication of National Middle School Association. The Journal publishes articles that promote middle level education and contribute to an understanding of the educational and developmental needs of youth between the ages of 10 and 15.

Articles submitted should specifically relate to the theory and practice of middle level education and should speak directly to practitioners in the field. The Journal seeks reports of successful programs, descriptions of effective techniques, thought-provoking essays, and application of research. The editor especially welcomes articles that focus on middle level schooling in urban settings and in rural or small schools.

The Journal publishes both thematic and general interest issues. Middle School Journal invites articles that have not been previously published and are not under review by any other publication. Manuscripts that do not meet the submission requirements will be returned to the author.

Submission Requirements

| Length | Manuscripts, including bibliography and references, should be in the range of 10 to 20 double-spaced pages. Tables, charts, and figures should be kept to a minimum, and if included should be placed at the end of the text. |
| Format & Style | All text, including title, headings, quotations, bibliography, and references should be double-spaced with wide margins. The editor strongly encourages the use of sideheads which increase readability. For matters of style, authors should follow the guidelines of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (Fourth Edition). |

Submission Process

| Copies | Submit five clear copies, one with a cover page giving author(s) names, professional affiliation, home and work addresses and telephone. The names of the authors should appear only on the cover page. |
| Submit to | Middle School Journal, Attn: Cherl Howman, Publications Assistant, National Middle School Association, 4151 Executive Parkway, Suite 300 Westerville, OH 43081. Hand or electronic submissions are not accepted. |
| Acknowledgment | Middle School Journal acknowledges receipt of manuscripts by postcard. Manuscripts that meet submission requirements will be logged and sent to referees. Authors will be notified by letter of this action. |

Review Process

| Review Process | Three members of a manuscript review board read and evaluate independently each manuscript. A decision regarding publication will be reached within four months of the date that the manuscript is sent out for review. This decision will be communicated to the lead author. Articles will not be published until a copyright assignment form is received. Assignment forms will be sent with the letter of acceptance. Authors whose manuscripts are selected for publication will be asked to submit finished copies including any editorial changes on diskette. |

Editing

| Editing | Middle School Journal reserves the right to edit manuscripts to improve clarity, to conform to style, and to fit available space. |
Call for Manuscripts

Middle School Journal is looking for articles dealing with a wide variety of middle school settings: rural, suburban, large and small urban. We invite anyone who wishes to address questions related to the following future theme issues to submit their manuscripts by the due dates listed.

Theme: Promoting Safe School Environments
Publication Date: May 2000 • Manuscripts Due: September 30, 1999

Manuscript Ideas:
- Dealing with alcohol, tobacco, and drugs
- Dealing with violence in society, community, and schools
- Facing sexual harassment
- Promoting cultural sensitivity
- Dealing with hate "crimes"
- Running democratic schools
- Community involvement

Theme: Responsive Curriculum in the Age of Standards
Publication Date: September 2000 • Manuscripts Due: September 30, 1999

Manuscript Ideas:
- Interdisciplinary or integrated units that are consistent with state standards
- Process of developing integrated curriculum that meet state standards
- Effects of integrated curriculum vs. subject-centered curriculum for meeting state standards
- Overcoming obstacles to create responsive curriculum

Theme: Integrating the Arts and Other Exploratory Subjects with Core
Publication Date: January 2001 • Manuscripts Due: January 31, 2000

Manuscript Ideas:
- Thematic units
- Planning process
- Necessary support and resources
- Effects on inclusion
- Integration of technology into instruction
- Effects on student performance

Theme: Implementing Turning Points Reforms
Publication Date: May 2001 • Manuscripts Due: May 31, 2000

Manuscript Ideas:
- Creating a climate for change
- Community involvement
- Role of networking
- Results of implementing recommendation on school climate and teacher student relationships
- Results of school change on student outcomes
- Role of building leadership
Middle School Journal

Editorial Calendar
Proposed for Middle School Journal Volume 32

September 2000
 Responsive Curriculum In Spite of the Odds
 - Bridging the Standards to Portfolios
 - Promoting Equity in the Mathematics Classroom
 - Balancing Developmental Appropriateness with Academic Rigor

November 2000
 Beyond Structural Change: Effective Practices in the Middle Grades
 - Interdisciplinary Teams, Active Learning, and Instructional Technology
 - Strategies for Shifting Classroom Ownership

January 2001
 The Arts and Exploratory Curriculum
 - Academies of Inquiry and Talent Development
 - Curriculum that is Challenging and Integrative

March 2001
 Open Theme

May 2001
 Implementing Turning Point Reforms
 - Improving Curriculum and Instruction
 - Engaging Families
 - Empowering Teachers and Administrators
Appendix B

Submission Letter
In the spring of 1997, the Harlan Community Middle School held student-led conferences for the first time. Our staff of teachers and administrators felt that switching to this format would help students build responsibility for the learning process, increase parent attendance and incorporate portfolio management. During the first year and a half of student-led conferences we made changes in our format and have held what we refer to as A.T. Conferences the last two years. We feel our format has many benefits and would like your consideration for selection for publication.

If you need any further information or assistance, please feel free to contact me at the numbers or addresses listed below.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

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