

Why Students Should Take the Lead in Parent-Teacher Conferences

By MindShift SEPTEMBER 23, 2014



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The following is an excerpt from “[Deeper Learning How Eight Innovative Public Schools Are Transforming Education in the Twenty-First Century](#),” by Monica R. Martinez and Dennis McGrath.

A particularly vivid example of putting students in the driver’s seat of their own education is the way they handle what traditional schools refer to as parent-teacher conferences. At these time-honored encounters, it’s not uncommon for students to stay home while the adults discuss their progress or lack thereof. But at schools built on Deeper Learning principles, the meetings are often turned into student-led conferences, with students presenting their schoolwork, while their teachers, having helped them prepare, sit across the table, or even off to the side. The triad then sits together to review and discuss the work and the student’s progress. The message, once again, is that the students are responsible for their own success.

The specific dynamics of these conferences vary widely. At California’s Impact Academy, three or four different sets of students and their families meet simultaneously, as teachers circulate through the room,

making sure parents are getting their questions answered, and only intervening if the student is struggling. Yet in all cases, the basic spirit is the same: this is the student's moment to share his or her reflections on achievements and challenges.

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At King Middle School, the twice-yearly student-led conferences are “one of the most important things we do to have students own their own learning,” says Peter Hill, who helps prepare kids in his advisory class, or crew, for their meetings. “And yet, the students' first impulse is to tear through their folders to find every best thing that they have done to show their parents.”

Instead, Hill encourages students to reflect on the connection between the effort they have made and the quality of their work. To this end, he asks them to choose three examples that help them tell their parents a deeper story: one that shows they have recognized both a personal strength and an area in which they are struggling. Most students, he says, have never thought about their learning in this way. Nor have most of their parents.

Indeed, many parents need some time to adjust to the new format, Hill acknowledges. Often, he says, a mother or father “just wants to ask me about how their child is doing, or how they are behaving. Sometimes I have to nudge the conversation back to let the child lead. We also have to teach the parents how to be reflective about their kids' work and how best to help.”

Eventually, however, most if not all parents appreciate the new process, teachers told us. “They come to realize that report cards don't tell them anything very useful,” says Gus Goodwin, Hill's colleague. “And over time, the parents begin to set a higher bar for their students at these conferences.”

As crew leader, Hill has his students practice how they'll discuss their work products with their parents. We watched as he spoke with one eighth-grade boy who initially shyly lowered his head as he confessed that he felt uncomfortable showing his work to anyone, including his mother and father. Hill told the boy he understood how he felt, and then offered some strategies for discussing his work in math, which both of them knew was a problem area. “You have done some good work of which you should be proud,” he told him. Together, they then picked out a paper that demonstrated the boy's effort, after which Hill suggested: “When we have the conference, why don't you use this assignment and begin by saying, ‘I have done a good job in math when I’” The boy wrote the phrase in his notebook, and visibly began to relax, after which Hill used the rest of the advisory period to find more examples of work that showed his effort.

As kids learn to advocate for themselves in this way, they discover how to let their parents know more specifically how to support them. Hill tells the story of one student who was clearly intelligent, but struggling with his independent reading. Rambunctious in class, the boy surprised Hill by sitting straight and quietly in his chair when his father, a seemingly stern man, walked into the room. But what surprised him even more was when the boy spoke up for himself during the conference, telling his father: “I realize now that I need to spend more time reading on my own and I need your help with that. I need my three brothers out of the room at night so I can read in silence.”

Such exchanges empower both students and their parents, Hill noted, adding: “When I checked in on the student a few weeks later, he was very pleased that his dad was keeping his brothers out of his room so he could do his silent reading.”

At Science Leadership Academy, health educator Pia Martin coaches her students in how to communicate with parents about difficult topics, such as why they might have received a C in a class. “How will your parents respond?” she asks. “What are the things that will trigger your parents and how will that play out? Will this lead to lost privileges or other forms of punishment? How do we minimize this?”

“In conference, I’m your advocate,” she always reminds them. Like Hill and several other teachers we spoke with, Martin said she usually helps begin conferences by encouraging students to talk about what they are good at, to prevent meetings from turning into blame-fests. She tells the students to start the meeting with two questions: “What do I do well?” and “How can I build on this?”

“I always tell them, ‘Own what you got,’ ” Martin says. Only after students spend a moment to recognize what they’re doing right does she encourage them to tackle the challenges, with the following questions: “What have I not done well?” and “How can I improve this?”

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