

Increasing Parent Participation in School Conferences of Seventh Grade Students  
Through the Use of Student-Led Conferences

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A Special Project

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FACULTY APPROVAL

Increasing Parent Participation in School Conferences of Seventh Grade Students  
Through the Use of Student-Led Conferences

Approved for the Faculty

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## ABSTRACT

The author set out to increase parent participation in school conferences at the seventh grade level through the use of student-led conferences. The author conducted the research over a period of three years. The first year traditional parent teacher conferences were conducted resulting in less than 50 percent parent participation. The next two years the author had students conduct student-led conferences, resulting in an over 40 percent increase in parent participation in school conferences.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

#### Background for the Project

In the beginning of a student's career in school, parents were excited and motivated to attend conferences to hear about student progress. As children grew older a significant decrease from year to year in the parent's participation in conferences was observed.

As a third grade teacher the author was aware that many parents came to conferences. Parents wanted to know how the individual student was doing in school. As a kindergarten teacher the author noticed an increase from the third grade conferences in parent attendance. The author had 100 percent attendance to conferences from kindergarten parents. As a sixth grade teacher the author became aware that parent participation in school conferences decreased to about 75 percent. Since students moved schools from fifth grade to sixth grade, parents wanted to see the new middle school. However, as a seventh grade teacher the author saw an even greater decrease in parent participation in school conferences.

Several professional development conversations at the author's school centered around parent involvement in schools. The topic of most of these conversations was that parent involvement increased student achievement. The author took the information about parent involvement increasing student

achievement and decided student-led conferences would be a clear way to get parents involved in a student's education.

### Statement of the Problem

A significant decrease in parent attendance in conferences as students continued through school had been observed. The decrease was particularly observable at the middle school level. Since the research was clear that parent involvement improved student achievement, improving parent attendance in conference was a worthwhile goal.

### Purpose of the Project

Through the use of student-led conferences the author intended to increase parent participation in conferences, particularly for parents of seventh grade students. Students used a folder in which student grade data was graphed weekly. Students reflected on the week and then set a goal for the following week. The action of graphing, reflecting and goal setting took some of the responsibility off the teacher and placed academic responsibility on the student in the classroom and when communicating student progress with parents.

### Delimitations

The study took place during the 2009-2010 school year in a largely agricultural community in southeastern Washington. During the 2008-2009 school year, the middle school in which the study took place did not make Adequate Yearly Progress, and was in step one of school improvement. The middle school had 1,338 students attending the school and the ethnic breakdown

of the student population was: 51.6 percent white, 41.0 percent Hispanic, 3.1 percent black, 2.8 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.2 percent Pacific Islander, 2.6 percent Asian, and 0.8 percent Native American. In the middle school 45.3 percent of students were on free and reduced lunch, 11.1 percent of students were in Special Education, 8.2 percent of students were transitional bilingual, 3.3 percent of students were migrant. There were 85 certificated classroom teachers with an average of 10.4 years experience teaching and of the 85 teachers 61.2 percent had a masters degree or higher. Of all the teachers at the middle school, 96.3 percent met No Child Left Behind highly-qualified standards. The students involved in the student-led conference process were seventh grade students in the author's Language Arts and History block classes.

### Assumptions

Students in the seventh grade demonstrated difficulty with organization; therefore students needed help learning how to organize themselves to improve achievement. Organization was needed to maintain student-led conference folders. Parents of seventh graders often did not see the importance of attending conferences, so attendance to conferences decreased from earlier grades. Parent participation in school activities improved student achievement. When students had ownership and responsibility in individual grades, the importance of the conferences was relayed to the parents not only from teachers but from students as well. Therefore more parents attended conferences, increasing parent participation in schools.

### Research Question

Will student-led conferences increase attendance of parents of seventh grade students in school conferences?

### Significance of the Project

The author recognized the importance of parent involvement in student academic achievement. As students grew older parent participation in conferences declined. Participation in student-led conferences was important for students to understand their personal roles and responsibilities in academics. As a school and a district, a significant responsibility for student achievement was ever present. The school and district recognized the importance of parent involvement in student education. Few professional developments within the district were offered to aid teachers in providing more parent involvement opportunities. If the results of student-led conferences were an increase in parent participation in conferences, the author's school, as well as the district, would look at providing more professional development opportunities centered on student-led conference formats and practices. If the result of student-led conferences was the same amount of parent participation as in previous years or a decrease, the author would look at ways to improve the use of student-led conferences in the classroom or just abandon the practice and look for new ideas.

### Procedure

During the first weeks of school, the author presented the student-led conference organization and protocol. Students were given folders equipped with

the materials needed to successfully organize all student-led conference materials. The folders contained dividers, one for each subject taught in the classroom block and then one for all pre and post assessments to be graphed. Behind each tab the author put a piece of graph paper and then several reflection goal setting sheets for students to track personal progress in each area of study every Friday throughout the quarter. For each assessment students graphed pre-test scores and posttest scores so students could see individual progress. All assessments, pre and post, were placed into the back pocket of the folder for students to share with parents at conferences. All grades for the week were complete and posted each Friday before class started so students could track individual progress. The author used the next two months to prepare students for student-led conferences which included: graphing grades, reflecting on progress, organization of conference materials, and practice presentations. Conferences took place in November of 2009 and again in March of 2010. Students presented information to parents regarding personal, educational growth from the beginning of the school year. The results of the attendance data were then compared and analyzed.

#### Definition of Terms

Adequate Yearly Progress. Adequate Yearly Progress was a measurement defined by the United States federal No Child Left Behind Act that allowed the U.S. Department of Education to determine how every public school and school district in the country was performing academically according to results on standardized tests.

No Child Left Behind. No Child Left Behind was federal legislation that put into action the theories of standards-based education reform. The legislation was based on the belief that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals would improve individual outcomes in education.

student-led conferences. Student-led conferences were school conferences between parents, students and teachers in which the student presented information about their individual academic achievements to their parents. The teacher was present and available for assistance, but the responsibility of academic conferences was given to the student.

#### Acronyms

AYP. Adequate Yearly Progress.

NCLB. No Child Left Behind.

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of Selected Literature

#### Introduction

Since a significant decrease in parent participation as students continued through school had been observed, the author chose to research ways to increase parent participation in student conferences. The author primarily refined all research to two major subtopics: parent involvement and student-led conferences. The author chose parent involvement as the goal of using student-led conferences was to find a way to get parents of middle school students involved in schools. The author chose student-led conferences as a subtopic as having a clear vision of what worked with student-led conferences was vitally important to the research.

#### Parent Involvement

The following research indicated that parent involvement in school was an essential component to student academic success. A direct correlation between parent involvement and students' achievement was noted. According to the *Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools* by G. Sue Shannon and Pete Bylsma, "The education of students is the shared responsibility of teachers, school staff, families and communities as well as the students themselves"(2007, p. 119).

Teachers and staff played a crucial role in a child's education, but so did the families. As indicated in *The Family: America's Smallest School* by Paul E. Barton and Richard J. Coley, "Parental Involvement allows parents to monitor school activities and coordinate their efforts with teachers" (2007, p. 34).



According to *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement* by Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp, “When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honor their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement” (2002, p. 13).

When the data on parent involvement was analyzed, the information found indicated that more than 90% of parents of children in early elementary school had attended a general meeting at school. The percentage dropped to 74% once a child got to 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Parents of students with good grades were more likely to attend school functions than parents of students with lower grades (Barton & Coley, 2007).

The research indicated that all parents needed to be involved in their student’s education.

Many studies found students with involved parents no matter what their income or background were more likely to; earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher level programs, be promoted, pass their classes and earn credits, attended school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school, graduate and go on to postsecondary school. (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 13)

Also, according to Henderson and Mapp (2002), studies showed families of all income levels from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds supported children’s education at home. “Middle class white families, however, tend to be

more involved in the school. Supporting parent involvement in school from all parents may be an important strategy for addressing the achievement gap” (2002, p. 13). As maintained by Barton and Coley (2007), research also indicated students performed better if both parents were involved in school regardless of whether both parents lived together.

The research on parent involvement was clear. Parents needed to be involved with student education. “High performing schools intentionally link family involvement strategies to academic goals” (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007, p. 119). High performing schools also made family involvement a part of school improvement plans and developed collaborative relationships centered on teachers, parents and the community. Strong school, family and community partnerships were based on mutual respect, responsibility and commitment. The responsibility for partnerships rested on the school and the district (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007)

#### Student-Led Conferences

“One way to improve the academic performance of students is to involve them directly in assessment of their classroom work” (Borba & Olvera, 2001, p. 333). Student-led conferences had proven over time to be beneficial for students as a tool for evaluation and reflection of personal academic achievements.

According to *Student-Led Parent-Teacher Conferences* by John A. Borba, and Cherise M. Olvera, “Student led conferences encourage students to participate

actively in the evaluation of their academic progress, which motivates students to think about and act on personal initiatives to improve learning” (2001, p. 333).

Through the literature reviewed about student-led conferences the author concluded that different schools had gone about organizing student led conferences in a variety of ways, but all student-led conferences had the following components in common. Preparation was key to a successful student-led conference. Students, teachers and parents alike all had to be prepared for the conference to take place. Students and teachers were involved in the organization of conference materials, reflections and goal setting. Parents were informed that the conference would not be a traditional parent-teacher conference but a student-led conference where the student presented the information to parents and took ownership of personal successes and needs for improvement. Finally, at the end of the conference, parents, students and teachers reflected on the conference in writing.

According to Sarah Shulkind, author of *New Conversations Student Led Conferences* (2008), the overall response from parents, teachers and students regarding student-led conferences was positive. One teacher from Shulkind’s school commented that, “all of the students were very successful at leading their conferences and were proud of themselves” (2008, p. 57). A seventh grade student from Shulkind’s school mentioned, “I hung those goals that I wrote on my wall because they help me very, very much and it helped me to be way more organized” (2008, p. 58). “Parents said that student led conferences enabled them

to be active partners in their children's academic growth" (2008, p. 58). Shulkind commented about no longer hearing students asking "How am I doing?" or "Did I do well?" Students were aware and responsible for their academic successes and short comings. "The purpose of student-led conferences is for students to reflect on their learning, and set goals to improve and grow" (Shulkind, 2008, p. 56).

In the article *Student-led Conferences at the Middle Level: Promoting Student Responsibility* by Donald Hackmann, Hackmann said, "Through empowering students--and parent--conferences are transformed into a constructive and rewarding experience for all. The conference atmosphere becomes relaxed and supportive" (Hackmann, 2009, p. 2). When reflecting on the data for student-led conferences versus parent-teacher conferences, Borba and Olvera commented that student-led conferences produced greater parent attendance rates than traditional parent-teacher conferences (Borba & Olvera, 2001).

### Summary

The information gathered in the literature analysis was clear. Parent involvement in schools was determined to be crucial. The more parents were involved in school the better the students performed. The use of student-led conferences increased student academic responsibility. When students were preparing their individual conference materials they were acutely aware and took a personal interest in their own academics.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology and Treatment of Data

#### Introduction

In the beginning of a student's career in school, parents were excited and motivated to attend conferences to hear about student progress. As children grew older a significant decrease from year to year in the parent's participation in conferences was observed. The author set out to prove that parent participation in school would improve through the use of student-led conferences.

#### Methodology

The method in which the research was analyzed was a qualitative approach. According to *Educational Research: Competencies for Analysis and Applications* by L.R. Gay and Peter Airasain (2003), qualitative approach was defined as, "The collection of extensive narrative data to gain insights into a phenomena of research" (p. 590). The author collected attendance data to parent teacher conferences in the fall and winter over several years.

#### Participants

The students involved in the research lived in an agricultural community in southeastern Washington. There were sixteen boys and thirteen girls in the class. The class was ethnically diverse with sixteen Caucasian students, eleven Hispanic students, two African American students, and two Asian/Pacific Islander students. Two students in the class were receiving special education services in reading.

Students' Language Arts and History classes were blocked into a two hour period of the day, where both subjects were taught with an integrated approach.

### Instruments

The data was gathered through the use of a sign-in sheet at parent teacher conferences in the fall and spring of each year. The parents who attended were asked by the author to sign in as proof of attendance at conferences. Attendance data was then converted into a percentage for analysis. The percentage data for each year was then put on a bar graph and analyzed.

### Design

The author collected data at parent teacher conferences for three years. In the first year the author's class did not use a student-led conference format. For the second two years the author's classes used a student-led conference format. The data from the three years was then put into percentages and analyzed.

### Procedure

During the first weeks of school, the author presented the student-led conference organization and protocol. Students were given folders equipped with the materials needed to successfully organize all student-led conference materials. The folders contained dividers, one for each subject taught in the classroom block and then one for all pre and post assessments to be graphed. Behind each tab the author put a piece of graph paper and then several reflection goal setting sheets for students to track personal progress in each area of study every Friday throughout the quarter. For each assessment students graphed pre-test scores and

posttest scores so students could see individual progress. All assessments, pre and post, were placed into the back pocket of the folder for students to share with parents at conferences. All grades for the week were complete and posted each Friday before class started so students could track individual progress. The author used the next two months to prepare students for student-led conferences which included: graphing grades, reflecting on progress, organization of conference materials, and practice presentations. Conferences took place in November of 2009 and again in March of 2010. Students presented information to parents regarding personal, educational growth from the beginning of the school year. The results of the attendance data were then compared and analyzed.

#### Treatment of the Data

Since the amount of students in a classroom varied through the years, the author felt it crucial to convert attendance data to percentages. These percentages were then put into a bar graph using Microsoft Excell. Results were then analyzed and discussed.

#### Summary

A need for parent participation in school conferences was noted. A qualitative study was conducted using the attendance data of parent teacher conferences in the fall and the spring over a three year period. In the first year parent teacher conferences were conducted using traditional methods. In the second and third years students conducted their own conferences with their parents, and the author

was available to assist. The author used attendance data converted to percentages and graphed using Microsoft Excell to report on findings.



## Chapter 4

### Analysis of the Data

#### Introduction

After having had experience as a teacher in a variety of different grade levels, the author observed that as students got older the parent's participation in traditional parent teacher conferences declined. A significant decline was observed from 100 percent parent attendance in kindergarten to a 50 percent parent attendance in the seventh grade. As the author had learned that parent participation in schools was an important piece in student academic success, there was a need to raise the level of parent participation at the seventh grade level. The author decided to develop a student-led conference protocol in the classroom.

#### Description of the Environment

The study took place during the 2007-2010 school years in a largely agricultural community in southeastern Washington. During the 2008-2009 school year, the middle school in which the study took place did not make Adequate Yearly Progress, and was in step one of school improvement. The middle school had 1,338 students attending the school and the ethnic breakdown of the student population was: 51.6 percent white, 41.0 percent Hispanic, 3.1 percent black, 2.8 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.2 percent Pacific Islander, 2.6 percent Asian, and 0.8 percent Native American. In the middle school 45.3 percent of students were on free and reduced lunch, 11.1 percent of students were in Special Education, 8.2 percent of students were transitional bilingual, 3.3

percent of students were migrant. There were 85 certificated classroom teachers with an average of 10.4 years experience teaching and of the 85 teachers 61.2 percent had a masters degree or higher. Of all the teachers at the middle school, 96.3 percent met No Child Left Behind highly-qualified standards. The students involved in the student-led conference process were seventh grade students in the author's Language Arts and History block classes.

### Research Question

Will student-led conferences increase attendance of parents of seventh grade students in school conferences?

### Results of the Study

During the 2007-2008 school year traditional parent teacher conferences were conducted. In the fall parent participation in those conferences was at 50 percent, with 30 of the author's 60 students' parents in attendance. In the spring that percentage fell slightly with 45 percent attendance or 28 of the author's 60 students' parents in attendance. During the 2008-2009 school year the author implemented student-led conferences. This change in classroom protocol increased the parent attendance at conferences in the fall to 98 percent, with 59 of the author's 60 students' parents in attendance. In the spring a slight dip in attendance occurred, however 92 percent, with 55 of the author's 60 students' parents, were in attendance. During the 2009-2010 school year the author continued use of student-led conferences. In the fall parent participation was at 90 percent, with 56 of the author's 62 students' parents in attendance. In the

spring that percentage fell slightly again to 85 percent, with 53 of the author's 62 students' parents in attendance.

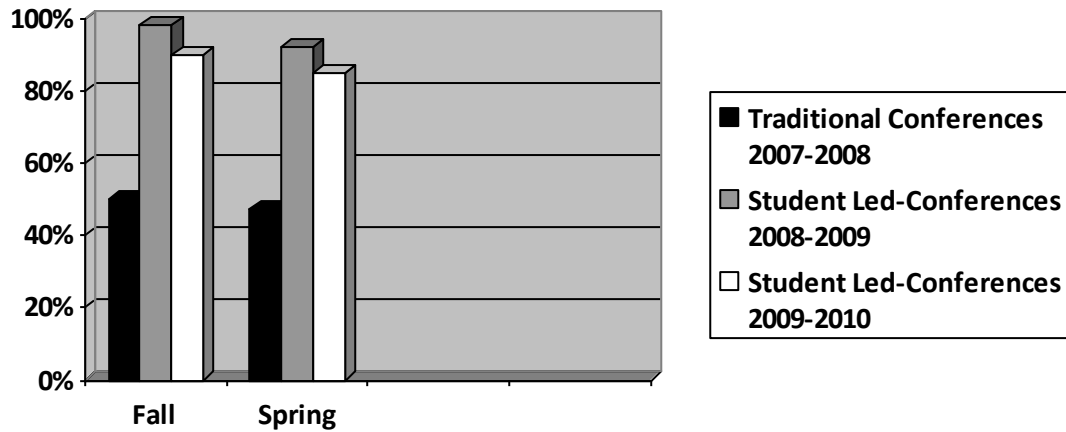


Figure 1. Conference Attendance Data

### Findings

After analyzing the data the author found that student-led conferences improved attendance of parents to fall and spring conferences at the seventh grade level. The author saw the attendance of parents to school conferences rise from 47 percent, when traditional conferences were conducted, to 98 percent when student-led conferences were conducted. The used of student-led conferences increased parent participation in school conferences.

### Discussion

In researching student-led conferences the positive evidence for their use was overwhelmingly positive. The use of student-led conferences in all the research showed an increase in academic responsibility in the student. Students were excited to share their successes with their parents. In researching parent

involvement, the evidence was abundantly clear; parent involvement increased student achievement. When the author noticed a decrease in parent involvement in the seventh grade, the author determined that parent attendance had to increase and the use of student-led conferences was a great way to make that increase.

### Summary

The author worked in a variety of different grade levels from kindergarten to seventh grade. The author worked in a small agricultural community in Southeastern Washington. The author observed that parent participation in traditional school conferences went from 100 percent participation in kindergarten to 47 percent participation when students entered seventh grade. The author found that parent participation in school conferences increased significantly at the seventh grade level when student-led conferences were conducted.

## CHAPTER 5

### Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

#### Introduction

The author noticed a dramatic decline in parent participation in school conferences from kindergarten to seventh grade. Research showed that parent participation in schools had a significant impact on student success in school. The author set out to prove that the use of student-led conferences improved parent participation in school conferences.

#### Summary

Throughout the author's teaching career, the author noticed a significant decline in parent participation in school conferences as students grew older. The author researched the use of student-led conferences to increase parent participation in school conferences. The author set out to answer the research question, "Will student-led conferences increase attendance of parents of seventh grade students in school conferences?"

A review of literature was conducted in the areas of student-led conferences and parent involvement. The review found that student-led conferences increased student responsibility for personal academic success. The review also found that parent participation in schools increased student academic success.

The author analyzed the data using a qualitative approach. The research was conducted over a period of three years. The first year traditional conferences

were conducted. The next two years student-led conferences were conducted.

The author found that the use of student-led conferences increased parent participation in school conferences.

### Conclusions

In chapter 2 the author researched student-led conferences and parent involvement in schools. The research on student-led conferences showed greater student knowledge of their personal academic standings and a greater responsibility in individual student academic success. The research on parent involvement in schools found that students with parents who were involved in school showed greater academic success.

The author found that the use of student-led conferences increased parent participation in school conferences at the seventh grade level. The author used data over three years to prove the significance of the use of student-led conferences. The first year the author used traditional conferences and found that less than 50 percent of the parents came to conferences. In the following years when student-led conferences were used, the participation of parents in conferences increased by over 45 percent. The author's research proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that student-led conferences increased parent participation in school conferences.

### Recommendations

The author recommends further research be done on various types of student-led conference formats. The author used a reflection and goal setting

format. Other formats for student-led conferences exist. Further research might determine which format is best. The author also recommends further research be done between a correlation on student-led conferences and standardized test scores.

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