

Student Led Conferences

Lincoln Middle School's journey toward student-led conferences began almost seven years ago, when a small group of teachers attended the NELMS Conference. During the conference, we had the opportunity to observe a presentation on student-led conferences. Several teachers from Team 5 and other teams also visited Spotlight middle schools throughout southern New England and discovered that this design for conferences was the preferred method. This format for parent/teacher/child interaction regarding the student's progress in school seemed to address the concerns that many teachers had about traditional conferences, including how to create positive and constructive communication between home and school as well as more actively engage students in their academic success.

In 2006, with the opening of the new middle school in Lincoln, Team 5 teachers decided that this was the perfect opportunity to try a new format for conferences. After consulting with our administrators and gaining permission to pilot student-led conferences, we set about the task of preparing the students. Each student was required to select and analyze work from all of their classes. Students were responsible for assessing their performance both in and outside of class, and considering how that behavior affected their overall success in school. Finally, students created two goals for themselves for the upcoming quarters. Students also practiced conducting a conference with a peer in preparation for the actual meeting with their parent or guardian.



Team 5 (l-r) Mr. Martin, Mrs. Pike, Mr. Prendergast, Mrs. Doherty & Mr. Kelley

On the day of the conferences, children on Team 5 escorted their significant adult into the assigned classroom, introduced him/her to the supervising teacher and retrieved their portfolios. Generally, two to three conferences occurred simultaneously. Students sat beside their parent/guardian and shared their work, analysis and academic goals. The teacher was ever present, answering questions and discussing work with the student and parent. However, the child was primarily responsible for orchestrating the conference. At the end of the session, the student, teacher and significant adult worked to create a third goal. Time was also built into our schedule to allow for parents to meet with individual teachers if needed.

Upon reflection, student-led conferences proved to be a successful replacement to the traditional parent-teacher format. Now, students actively engaged in their academic achievement. They worked with their parents/guardians to identify strengths and weakness, and created strategies to ensure positive outcomes. Parents were no longer rushed through a 5-8 minute conference with a series of teachers. Sessions lasted from ten to twenty-five minutes; there was no time limit because our students were conducting the meeting. Thus, parents/guardians had ample time to engage in constructive conversations regarding their child's progress in school, both with the student and the teacher. We noticed that our attendance for conferences increased from 60% to 90% with the introduction of the student-led format. Not only were the conferences more constructive, positive and engaging, but we were able to form partnerships with more parents.

Since the pilot year, other teams in our building have adopted the student-led conference design. Team 5 teachers, along with teachers who have since participated in this initiative, have helped to train all staff members in this conference design. The 2009-2010 school year will mark the first year that student-led conferences will be conducted throughout Lincoln Middle School. In our quest to encourage positive home/school communication as well as develop responsibility and academic reflection in our classrooms, student-led conferences provide the opportunity for productive dialogue between students, parents and teachers.