

# It's Time to Revamp the Parent-Teacher Conference Process: Let's Include the Child!

By Dr. Janette Boazman



**T**ake a moment to reflect on the parent-teacher conferences you've attended or what parent-teacher conferences were like when you were in school. In many instances, the parent-teacher conference has not changed a great deal over the years. The typical routine often goes something like this:

- The school sets aside a date for parent-teacher conferences.
- Parents sign up for a time to meet with their child's teacher.
- On conference day, during their timeslot, the parents and teachers meet for a short time.
- There is discussion of the child's academic progress and behavior.
- The child, for whom the conference is being held, waits outside of the classroom or at home to get a report from the parents.
- Post conference, parents report what they feel is best for the child to hear and in a way they want their child to hear the news. They may or may not discuss all of what was said in the conference.

What's missing from this process? The child is missing from this process. The child, the most important stakeholder, is visibly absent and a passive participant in the process. Other problems occur with this model:

- Gifted children who participate in curriculum enrichment or gifted pullout programs often have a special teacher for those classes. Because conferencing frequently takes place with only the general education teacher, the development and the

progress of the gifted learner in the gifted setting is not always discussed when the parents and the general education teacher meet.

- When gifted children are accelerated, they often have multiple teachers. This can lead to multiple parent-teacher conferences where the gifted student is left outside of the conversation.
- Parents often choose to conference with the one teacher that is perceived to be accountable for the largest portion of their child's academic profile and expect that teacher to share reports from their child's other teachers.

Now, clear the traditional image of parent-teacher conferences from your mind and contemplate a conference process and setting that has the potential to bring together multiple teachers to collaborate on the growth and development of your child. Picture a process that allows for active student participation, positive psychological growth, planning for academic achievement, self-evaluation, and the development of a strong and trusting team of the child, parents, and teachers.



One conferencing process that allows for such learner growth, development, and connection is the **student-led conference**.

The student-led conference really is what it implies. It's a parent conference where the student takes the lead role in preparing and

## What is a Student-Led Conference?

In the educational setting, students are led by the classroom teacher or an advisor on the preparation for leading the conference. The preparation begins at the start of the school year and continues, at least, through the last formal parent conference day held by the school. Throughout the school year, students, with teachers or advisors, build a performance portfolio of work and assignments they are working on or have completed. By using their performance portfolio at the parent conference, the student explains progress toward mastery of academic, character, and behavioral objectives and goals. *(For more details on the process, refer to the resources listed at the end of this article.)*

In general, the process usually includes the following:

- Preconference preparations are made by the student with the guidance of the teacher or advisor. This includes practice in speaking and leading the discussion for the conference.
- At the time of the conference, the parents are invited into the classroom. Their student greets them and introduces them to all members present at the conference. They include parents, the teacher(s), and other involved individuals that the student wants present.
- The student thanks the family and all parties for assembling for the meeting and gives an overview of the format and objectives for the conference.
- The student explains work samples from all content areas and discusses academic grades, goals, and the action plan for positive development. If the conference is held at the time report cards are issued, the student usually addresses the grades presented on the report card.
- Discussion of behavior and character development is led by the student.
- The student leads a discussion on how the parents can help at home.
- The conference ends and the student thanks all participants for being present.
- Participants in the conference fill out post-conference paperwork.

presenting personal achievements, areas for improvement, and goals for the future.

The student-led conference is not new. Written work about this concept began to emerge in professional journals in the late 1980s.<sup>1</sup> The student-led conferencing style is not exclusive to one educational population: It can be used in general education or

special education settings. It's not just for middle and high school age students and can be used as early as 3rd grade—and possibly earlier in gifted learner circumstances. And, the student-led conference process can be implemented schoolwide or in select environments, such as those settings where we see gifted learners.

### Why are Student-Led Conferences Valuable for Gifted Learners?

Studies as far back as 1931 indicate that gifted students demonstrate different learning characteristics and traits.<sup>2</sup> Gifted learners:

- Grasp concepts more quickly and tend to show competency in basic skills at an early age
- Think creatively
- Tend to have a positive self-image and leadership qualities
- Examine topics more deeply than those around them
- Are curious
- Read more than that the average student
- May demonstrate a high and sustained devotion to self-directed projects

When a gifted student is allowed to progress and achieve personal goals, they display independence, self-initiative, and metacognitive ability. These characteristics indicate that student-led conferences are a natural fit for gifted students. Students can become more reflective learners who develop self-regulation.

In the student-led conference, the student has the opportunity to show academic knowledge, behavioral practice, and personal achievements. It also allows for reflection, recognition, and discussion of academic and behavioral weakness. The learner can discuss a plan for mastering regular education objectives, along with a plan for what they would like to learn beyond the regular education curriculum. Learners have the chance to set goals and ask for the support they need to achieve those goals.

Student-led conferences—and the growth that comes with regularly occurring student-led conferencing—has the potential to positively impact the emotional and academic development of the student and move the student closer to talent development, happiness, and thriving throughout their formative years and beyond. Isn't it time for a change? 🌱

### How Parents Can Inspire Change



Implementation of student-led conferences is gaining momentum. However, empowering the student through the use of student-led conferences assigns a non-traditional purpose to the parent conference. Parents can help schools make the shift to student-led conferences.

If you value this process and your child's school has not put student-led conferences in place yet, ask your child's teacher(s) or school administrators to consider implementing the student-led conference with the gifted student population. Present your vision and hopes for your child and the other gifted children that will come with use of this process. Volunteer to help with the preparations and getting the program started. Your advocacy for this program and your help could spark a schoolwide change that makes an important difference in the lives of many students in gifted education and general education settings.



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**Resources**

- Bailey, J., & Guskey, T. (2000). *Implementing student-led conferences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Benson, B., & Barnett, S. (2005). *Student-led conferencing: Using showcase portfolios*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Kinney, P. (2012). *Fostering student accountability through student-led conferences*. Westerville, OH: Association for Middle Level Education.
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**Author's Note**

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**Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> Guyton, J. M., & L. L. Fielstein. (1989). Student-led parent conferences: A model for teaching responsibility. *Elementary School and Guidance Counseling*, 23(2), 169–172.
- Hubert, B. D. (1989). Students belong in the parent-teacher conference, too. *Educational Leadership*, 47(2), 30.
- Little, A. W., & J. Allan. (1989). Student-led parent teacher conferences. *Elementary School Guidance and Counseling*, 23(3), 210–218.
- <sup>2</sup> Hollingworth, L. S. (1931). The child of very superior intelligence as a special problem in social adjustment. *Mental Hygiene*, 15(1), 1–16.