Student-Led, Teacher-Supported Conferences: Improving Communication Across an Urban District

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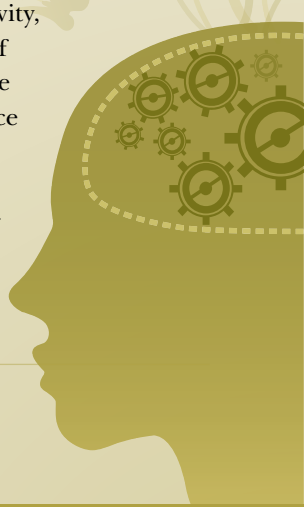
After participating in student-led conferences, an eighth grader responded in a fast write, "I feel more involved with what my parents think about me and the progress I've made." A seventh grade student in another classroom wrote, "I thought that the conferences were actually kind of cool. They let us explain our work and grades instead of just teachers explaining how they think we did." A parent completing a survey after a student-led conference commented, "Having my son explain more than the final grade truly helped me understand just what areas I can help him with." Another parent remarked, "Great idea! Having *kids* explain their behavior lets the parents and teacher know where they need to improve." When asked about how her first ever student-led conferences went, a veteran teacher said, "I was amazed at how honest and how articulate my students were."

According to *This We Believe,* student-led, teacher-supported conferences empower young adolescents to accept responsibility for their own learning. Such conferences invite parents into the learning environment, helping them better understand the unique developmental needs of their children. Third, student-led, teacher-supported conferences change the way that teachers design and use assessments in classrooms (National Middle School Association, 2003).

Because educators in Anchorage, Alaska, have bought into these principles, through a grassroots effort, the Anchorage School District is slowly changing the way it reports academic, social, and emotional growth to parents. Managing complex change in a large district is no simple task. To accomplish this change, Anchorage is trying to mirror the best practices from the corporate sector. With a clear vision articulated, teacher skills outlined, incentives identified, resources gathered, and an action plan underway (Thousand & Villa, 1995), the district is working toward the goal of implementing student-led, teacher-supported conferences district-wide (Figure 1).

The Anchorage schools

Anchorage, Alaska, is an urban school district with more than 7,000 middle school students, 96 different languages, and a 23% mobility rate. We have curious moose that roam onto school grounds, earthquake drills along with periodic volcanic activity, and short winter days with five hours of daylight. Although we are located three hours by plane from Seattle, we still face the same issues that challenge urban middle schools every day in the lower 48: bullying, drugs, gangs, and leaving no child behind. Our nine neighborhood middle schools are diverse, representing



This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics: A shared vision that guides decisions — School-initiated family and community partnerships — Multifaceted guidance and support services

the various geographic and socioeconomic areas of Anchorage. Anchorage's only Title I school, with an aging infrastructure, was demolished at the end of the 2006–2007 school year because of the passage of a bond to replace it. Opened in fall 2007 was a tenth middle school that relieved the overcrowding in many of the buildings and expanded the middle school concept by adding sixth graders to the mix. Regardless of the school, our underlying mission is the same. We provide our young adolescents with a strong, innovative curriculum and teachers who are responsive to their developmental needs.

A brief history of Anchorage middle schools

Twelve years ago, Anchorage began the journey of transforming its junior high schools to middle schools. The schools added staffing, restructured the master schedules to accommodate team planning time, and began to tackle the social and emotional issues unique to this age group. Instructional teams embraced the opportunity to coordinate their time through interdisciplinary planning and teaching and were receptive to staff development in literacy strategies across the curriculum. Elective offerings were re-evaluated, intramural sports were adjusted, and counselors became more integral to our success. However, effectively communicating with parents continued to be a challenge. Parents were still herded into multipurpose rooms to wait in long lines to talk to teachers individually for a few precious minutes about their child's progress. Parents left with some questions answered, a report card in hand, and suggestions for their child's improvement in school. But they also often left frustrated.

Not only were parents dissatisfied with this approach to conferences, but teachers felt ineffective. Because of this consistent feedback, a few visionary teams started exploring the use of student-led conferences. These agents of change eagerly learned from their elementary feeder schools and tried to offer an alternative to the secondary unscheduled parent-teacher conferences. Elementary teachers were facilitating 20-minute, pre-scheduled conferences, with students leading their parents through a portfolio of work samples, which documented their growth. These parents walked away every year in elementary school armed with invaluable assessment information presented through the voices of the students, and these parents were now the ones who had to wait in long lines at middle schools for a three- to five-minute conversation with a teacher. Something had to change.

Reflecting on the strengths of elementary student-led conferences and supported with current research by the National Middle School Association (Kinney, Munroe, & Sessions, 2000), a handful of volunteer teams sprinkled across the district decided to offer student-led conferences at the middle level. Although their early vision was well thought out, there were obstacles to overcome. One such obstacle was scheduling 120 families in the district-allotted, 20-minute time slots. These teams began by scheduling between 12 and 16 conferences concurrently in each of the four core teachers' classrooms. This required the utmost in organization on the part of both teachers and students alike and made it difficult to provide for quality teacher interaction. Even with some weak points in this initial implementation, parents responded favorably to having assigned 20-minute conference times. Attendance on teams that held student-led conferences was extremely high, with teachers often reporting 90% or more of the parents attending. Parents commented on how they enjoyed hearing insights about academic progress through the eyes of the students and appreciated seeing artifacts and work samples. Student goal setting and ongoing reflections gave parents a better understanding of their students' strengths and weaknesses. However, many parents remarked on how they missed the interaction with the teachers. In fact, some were quick to point out that the process felt no different than what they did every evening over the dinner table, the sharing of each other's day. Even conferences that were facilitated by one "homeroom" teacher resulted in this kind of feedback. Parents liked the assigned times and enjoyed interacting with their children, but in the end, they wanted to be reassured by all of the core teachers that their children were where they were supposed to be, both academically and socially.

Student conference reform advances

The idea spreads

Student-led conferences continued to be refined by those teams that initially participated; however, it was awkward for some teams to participate in this alternative form of

conferencing in a school, while others did not. One school decided to launch a school-wide effort and sought support from the state. This school petitioned the state to use the time allotted for a post-conference, half-day inservice toward an additional evening of conferencing for parents. In addition, the state sanctioned the early release of students for an additional half day. Both the inservice teacher time and the early release of students enabled the school to offer two afternoons and evenings of student-led conferences (13 hours), instead of the customary one afternoon and evening (6.5 hours). The extra time for conferencing allowed the school to increase the teacher interaction level with each family, and at the same time, gave working parents more opportunities to schedule conferences at their convenience. With more time overall, teams could now comfortably schedule only six conferences concurrently during every 20-minute time slot, in contrast to the 12 to 16 they were previously squeezing in, allowing more time for each conference. This ensured that each teacher on

Student's math teacher joins a student-led, teacher-supported conference in progress.
photo provided by author.

the team had sufficient time to sit down with each family to address student progress. Conference attendance at this school increased from 65% to 85% in the first year of implementing student-led conferences. The state-approved time exchange, along with increased parent attendance, positive feedback, and empowered students provided compelling incentives for continuing with this school-wide initiative.

Soon after, another school decided to try school-wide, student-led conferences and also applied for a state waiver. Some of the original teams that were the district change agents were now invited by this school to share their successes and their implementation plans. Accomplishing change was easy at these two schools since the student-led conference initiative was home

Figure 1 The elements of managing complex change

Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	=	Change
	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	=	Confusion
Vision	+		+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	=	Anxiety
Vision	+	Skills	+		+	Resources	+	Action Plan	=	Resistance
Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+		+	Action Plan	=	Frustration
Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+		=	Treadmill

Source: Thousand & Villa, 1995

grown, and colleagues shared their skills with each other. With success stories floating around the district and participation numbers so high, district leaders started to take notice. Lengthy discussions were held, and the idea of implementing student-led conferences across the district blossomed. Bringing on board one to two new schools every year found its way into the district's six-year plan, and a serious effort was made to provide adequate training for all schools.

Developing the action plan

As the middle school literacy support teacher, I was asked to help organize a half-day training template to be delivered at all of our middle schools during our fall 2006 inservice training. A committee was quickly formed, which included instructional support staff from special education, gifted education, science, math, social-emotional learning, and technology. Designing effective training was challenging because of the wide range in knowledge, skills, and experience in the district. Some teachers had been using student-led conferences for several years, while others were new to the concept. It was important not only to offer step-by-step guidance for the new users but to also improve the implementation models at the schools already participating.

One major improvement we wanted to tackle in our training was the role of the teachers within the conferences. We heard over and over from parents that they liked this student-led conferencing format, but they missed the face-to-face conversations with the teachers. We needed to correct the misconception that students were meant to lead the entire conference on their own, while teachers faded into the background.

To eliminate this confusion, we quickly adopted the phrase *student-led, teacher-supported* conferences in all training discussions. Our ultimate goal for fall training was to provide a strong foundation, with a handful of consistent principles for all staff to follow, which would equip teachers with the skills they needed for success. We created a simple mnemonic, the ABCs of student-led, teacher-supported conferences, on which we based our training:

A – Actively engaged
B – Balanced portfolios
C – Continuous communication.

> **Having my son explain more than the final grade truly helped me understand just what areas I can help him with.**

Figure 2 Examples of end-of-section discussion graphics

Teacher Preparation

— Start early
— Begin conversations with parents and students
— Adapt forms from the Middle Link
— Share tasks among each subject area
— Set up portfolios
— Discuss guidelines for selecting work samples

Student Preparation

— Select work samples that represent strengths and weaknesses
— Include work samples from all classes
— Create and attach sticky note talking points to each work sample
— Complete all self-reflection forms honestly
— Practice with a partner – dress rehearsal

Actual Conferences

Student: Avoid "show and tell" approach; elaborate on sticky note talking points
Teacher: Provide anecdotal comments; use teacher stems to help construct rich comments

Student: Follow agenda and pause when teachers drop in
Teacher: Keep moving from conference to conference

Student: Pace yourself and stay focused
Teacher: Schedule additional conference time at parents' request

To ensure the training was well received, the committee reflected on the early successes of teams training other schools across the district. Using that as a model, committee members decided to chronicle two experienced teams' efforts to implement student-led conferences through videotape. We scheduled numerous filming sessions, which included teacher planning meetings, student preparation lessons, actual student-led conferences, and exit interviews with the parents, teachers, and students. With careful editing, four hours of raw footage was whittled down to a comfortable 15-minute videotape.

A fast-paced photomontage from across the district was a way not only to open the videotape but to also honor all the schools that were already underway with student-led conferences. The executive director of middle schools followed the photomontage with an introduction to where the district had been and where it was headed with its grassroots initiative. The body of the videotape was organized into short sections, recognizing the critical need to build in teacher talk time during training. To underscore our main points and to signal the end of each section for discussion, graphics were inserted (Figure 2). Section one documented the team preparation meetings, where teachers discussed scheduling families and tailoring forms to meet their needs. Section two addressed the preparation taken by students including selecting work samples for their portfolios, completing self-evaluation forms, and role-playing conferences. Observing an entire student-led conference from beginning to end would be too tiring for the viewers, so instead, we merged sections from two student conferences, toggling back and forth. To provide a meaningful overview, we zoomed in on the students sharing from their portfolios and showed the core teachers rotating in to comment on academic progress. Hearing directly from the stakeholders was a powerful way to conclude the videotape. Snippets from exit interviews with parents, teachers, and students woven together gave participants a chance to hear firsthand the voices of all those involved. This training videotape provided a pivotal, standardized resource to frame the professional development for all of our teachers.

Figure 3 Tri-fold roles at-a-glance

TEAM TEACHERS	STUDENT	PARENTS
Help students compile a final portfolio that reflects all core subjects (3–4 work samples for each subject)	Select work samples that reflect your progress in each core subject area	Request a conference time that fits your work schedule; if a conflict arises, reschedule with the team
Demonstrate to students how to write insightful "talking points" for each work sample	Prepare "talking points" for each sample that help explain your learning; avoid "show and tell"	Bring your child with you; the student leads this type of conference with support from all of the teachers
Ask students to write goals in each subject area; remember to revisit these later in the year to evaluate their progress	Take goal setting seriously; make a plan for improvement in each subject area	Listen carefully to what your child has to say about his/her work samples; ask clarifying questions
Ask students to complete behavior and/or work habits checklists	Be honest about your behavior/work habits in each core subject area	Expect your child to synthesize his/her learning; this is not "show and tell"
Provide an agenda for students to follow during the actual conferences to help with time management	Use your agenda to help you pace yourself during the actual conference	Review your child's goals carefully; offer specific support your family can provide
Use class time for students to rehearse their conference	When practicing for your conference, make sure your portfolio is organized	Behavior/work habits are critical to success at middle school; analyze these carefully
Make sure all teachers discuss student progress with each family during the actual conferences	When teachers drop in during your actual conference, pause politely and let them speak	When teachers drop in, ask them questions to help you better understand your child's progress in each subject area
Offer parents the opportunity to sign up for an additional conference if they prefer meeting with the teachers by themselves	Encourage your parents to sign up for an additional conference if they want more information	Schedule another conference if you need to meet privately with the teachers

Resources for teachers and parents

In addition to preparing the videotape, we also focused on centralizing our teacher-created resources. Working smarter and not harder is always an important goal for overworked professionals. Over the years, teams had been circulating various forms that worked well for them. Schools used these as springboards to create their own personal forms. Not wanting teachers to feel they had to start from scratch, district planners used this as an opportunity to upload the various resources on the middle school Web site, the Middle Link (http://www.asdk12.org/middlelink). Categories of forms quickly emerged (agendas, scheduling, behavior checklists, portfolio preparation, and post conferences), and these were placed into a "Teacher Resource Center." To meet the needs of parents, we also created a "Parent Resource Center" that provided more extensive explanations, student and parent feedback about the conference experiences, and suggestions to help improve communication. It also became apparent we needed to be more responsive to our non-English speaking families, so we translated key informational materials into Spanish, Hmong, Korean, Tagalog, and Samoan. We also provided links to other Web sites for further research and recommended current professional books and journal articles.

Two members from the instructional support team co-delivered the half-day training sessions at each school in fall 2006. All members had, at one time or another, used student-led conferences in their own classrooms, so they felt they could passionately speak to the district-wide initiative. Trainers not only heightened awareness about student-led, teacher-supported conferences through the use of the videotape and the district Web site, the Middle Link, but they also took advantage of the training time and modeled cooperative learning strategies, differentiated instruction techniques, and reciprocal teaching to improve reading comprehension. Teachers walked away with a step-by-step checklist of what to do before, during, and after conferences. A trifold handout was created, laying out the roles of teachers, parents, and students side-by-side. Written using parallel construction, the Roles-at-a-Glance provided a concise list of responsibilities for all of the stakeholders (Figure 3).

Funding was secured to provide supplemental resources, which included multiple copies of professional books for teacher study groups. In addition to using the National Middle School Association's practitioner's guide by Kinney, Munroe, and Sessions (2000), *Implementing Student-Led Conferences* by Bailey and Guskey (2001) was selected. A credit class, "Using Digital Portfolios in the

Classroom," was created by the technology instructional support teacher and sponsored through the University of Alaska. Teachers were extended an invitation to participate, as a means to provide further opportunity for research and to procure continuing education credits.

Ongoing training

Besides providing all staff with this half-day training early in the fall, planners knew they would need to encourage ongoing conversations about student-led conferences throughout the year. Each semester, they scheduled two rounds of return visits to the schools in an effort to meet with core teams during their team planning time. Teams communicated to trainers the topics they wanted addressed, and these discussions were then tailored to meet the needs of each team. A common thread we heard from many teams was the need for more explicit instruction in how to prepare students to talk insightfully about their work samples. Because of this feedback, the instructional support team collaborated with students at one school to produce a nine-minute video capturing a role-play of a weak conference versus a strong conference. We also met with the district-wide core curriculum committees to brainstorm with department chairs best academic practices that enhance student-led conferences.

Meetings with the district-wide co-curricular committees (music, art, physical education, and world languages), challenged the support team to view student-led conferences from an entirely different perspective. From our experiences with student-led conferences early on, we knew attendance could decrease for co-curricular staff unless we carefully planned for their participation in the conferencing process. At all sites, we worked hard to address the issue proactively to increase the number of parents visiting with the co-curricular staff before or after their scheduled student-led conference with the core teams. By placing co-curricular staff in a central meeting area such as the multipurpose room or library, parents were easily able to access the teachers. In addition, co-curricular staff frontloaded communication with families by placing information and invitations into the core teams' student portfolios. Visuals such as posters and digital videos were displayed around the school, showcasing the co-curricular staff and their classes. Many of the elective teachers opted for performance-based portfolio conferences, which lured even more parents to stop by to see them. Some schools used incentives to ensure co-curricular staff were not left out. The Passport graphic organizer (Figure 4), created by one of our schools, helped guide parents. Upon completion, it also served as a raffle ticket for student prizes the following day at lunch.

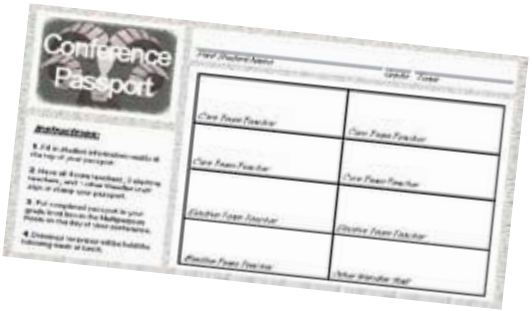


Figure 4
School-wide conference passport

How we know it is working

Anchorage's attendance rates after implementing school-wide student-led conferences is impressive. Figure 5 shows the change in parent attendance at fall conferences the first year after each of the seven of nine middle schools implemented the two-day, student-led conference mode. During this implementation, a standardized parent feedback form was made available to every family. Results were shared with each school and team to provide staff a chance to reflect on their implementation and set goals for the spring (Figure 6). During the months that followed, the support team continued with team visits focusing on those goals. Also during this time, Information Technology developed a tool (patterned after what a team of teachers had created on their own) that allowed parents to sign up for student-led conference appointment times over the Internet. In the spring, this was field-tested with success by two volunteer teams at one of the schools. The year came to a close with an online staff survey that was made available to each certified teacher to help shape a staff development plan for the following school year.

District-wide change

It is not unusual to hear about school or district educational initiatives that fail. Change is not easy. To avoid the common pitfalls of instilling change, we in Anchorage viewed the process through the lens of the business world, making customer service for our families a top priority. We accomplished our district-wide change because we had five elements in place: vision, skills, incentives, resources, and an action plan. Our vision started with a few teams across our district that wanted

Figure 5 Attendance rates after implementing student-led, teacher-supported conferences

School	*Student-Led Conference Attendance*	*Previous Fall Conference Attendance*	*Percent Change*
School A	*86%*	*65%*	*+21%*
School B	*65%*	*58%*	*+7%*
School C	*75%*	*62%*	*+13%*
School D	*91%*	*78%*	*+13%*
School E	*75%*	*62%*	*+13%*
School F	*82%*	*70%*	*+12%*
School G	*90%*	*78%*	*+12%*

Figure 6 Averages of parent survey responses (First year)

Items on Parent Survey	Average Scores (1 low – 5 high)
My child was prepared for the conference.	4.38
I now have a better understanding of how my child learns.	4.22
I have a clear picture about what my child has been studying this quarter in each subject area.	4.33
I have a better understanding of my child's effort, study skills, and classroom behavior in each subject area.	4.43
Each of my child's core teachers made a point to make contact with me during the student-led conference.	4.18
My child's Elective/PE teachers provided information about my child's progress.	4.00
The student-led conference was valuable and informative.	4.40

to empower students in their learning and improve parent communication. This grew into a district-wide vision to have all of our middle schools trained in the foundations of student-led, teacher-supported conferences. Ongoing training was organized, which equipped teachers with the skills they needed to successfully implement student-led conferences. A major incentive for our teachers was the added time. With creative use of the instructional calendar supported by the state, we moved from 6.5 hours to 13 hours of conferencing twice a year. Most sites welcomed this trade in time as a way to better serve the families. Resources such as professional books were made available and teacher-created resources were centralized on our district middle school Web site so that no one felt as if they had to reinvent the wheel. An action plan was created months in advance that included a district-wide, half-day training as well as ongoing training throughout the year. All schools were invited to be part of the six-year plan of offering student-led conferences across the district. Ultimately, each school would launch school-wide, student-led conferences when its faculty felt it was ready. With all five elements in place, change took place. If any one of these elements had been missing, our results would not have been as positive.

We believe that thoughtful, district-wide change on a large scale can take place and that parent communication can be improved through student-led, teacher-supported conferences. We also believe that young adolescents can be empowered in their own learning and begin to accept more responsibility for that learning. Finally, we believe that assessment can be more responsive to their individual needs when it includes students' reflections on the process. Although student-led conferences were an early vision of a few passionate teachers, district leaders carefully listened and acted upon the momentum they observed. Anchorage middle schools are poised for success as they continue to manage the complex change of offering an alternative to traditional parent-teacher conferences. Anchorage middle school educators are confident ongoing results will prove to be well worth the time and energy put forth by all.

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