

## MIDDLE LEVEL ISSUES

Vol. 5 #1, January, 2005

### **Student-led Conferences**

By Mary S. Childress and Robert C. Spear Ed.D.

“Schools do not presume to educate children alone. In today’s society, genuine family and community involvement are fundamental components of successful schools for young adolescents.” Middle level schools provide opportunities for parent involvement through volunteer programs and a variety of informational meetings but a connection with the student is vital. “Research studies clearly link the involvement of both family and other adults in the community with higher levels of student achievement, improved student behavior and greater overall support for schools.” One powerful way to create this link and improve communication is instituting student-led conferences.

Student-led conferencing fundamentally differs from the traditional parent-teacher conference. For one, the student presents a portfolio of work to their parents and the portfolio includes student selections of completed work from each current area of study. Teachers help students select the material that is representative of their strengths and weaknesses, a process that enables teachers to work with students to select appropriate material while reviewing, evaluating and discussing student achievement. After selection, students write a personal reflection on each submission that includes what they learned from the assignment and why they put the particular piece in their portfolio. It is helpful when students select two pieces of work from each subject that clearly shows their growth, improvement and/or understanding to their parents.

In addition to the portfolio, the student-led conference includes setting goals for improvement. Goal setting and reflection is an important part of a student’s education as they move toward maturity. It is essential to teach students to be responsible for their own learning and to play an active role in their own learning which is one of the most important aspects of the middle level. After the construction of the portfolio, students set two goals for improvement. These goals are presented to their parents at the student-led conference. In addition, the student and his/her parents design a third goal together. Setting goals together encourages a stronger school-to-home partnership, parent involvement, and gives parents a clear understanding of how they can help their child to meet their educational goals.

Students then rehearse their conference with their peers. This helps to “move the role of the teacher into the background so students are free to take the lead in reporting on their own academic progress” and makes them feel more comfortable with their parent. The student partners role-play and devise numerous questions to ask, taking on the role of the parent and assisting their partner to clarify assignments, explain their reflections, and indicate how they plan to accomplish their goals.

The benefits of a student-led conference for students are as numerous as the conference themselves. The benefits include:

- ◆ Helping them to take ownership for their learning success
- ◆ Encouraging them to engage in a process of self evaluation
- ◆ Putting them in-charge of their portfolio
- ◆ Enabling them to share and discuss their work with their parents

- ◆ Assisting them to set goals for their future success in school

In addition to the student rewards, the student-led conference benefits parents as they look forward to:

- ◆ Gleaning an understanding of classroom activities and expectations
- ◆ Spending time discussing the importance of education with their child
- ◆ Seeing their child's work first-hand and what each curriculum offering entails
- ◆ Encouraging their son/daughter to accept personal responsibility for their academic performance

The student-led conference creates an avenue for increased communication. Though the traditional conference should be offered, schools that employ the student-led conference discover that very few traditional conferences are requested and that 100% attendance at the student-led conferences is a reachable goal.

“Achieving high academic performance for every student requires more than just raising standards or gaining an adequate score on a standardized test. It means empowering students to learn, to become intellectually engaged and to behave as responsible citizens. It calls for them to develop initiative and responsibility so they can reach their potential.” The student-led conference helps middle school-age students to accept responsibility for learning and creates educational partnerships with parents, in an effort to promote high standards and achievement for all middle level students.

### **Resources**

Brenda A. Dyck, “Student-Led Conferences Up Close and Personal,” National Middle School Association, *Middle Ground Vol 6 #2*, October 2002.

Rick Wormeli, *Meet Me in the Middle*. National Middle School Association, Portland, 2001.

*This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*. National Middle School Association, Westerville, Ohio, 2003.

*Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*: Anthony W. Jackson and Gayle A. Davis; Teachers College Press, Columbia University, NY.

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