

Final Report on Student-Led Conferences

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Vermont and a New Level of Personalization

As Vermont schools enter an age of personalized learning mandated by Vermont Act 77, the Flexible Pathways Initiative, all students grades 7-12 will learn through proficiency based learning documented by a personalized learning plan (Vermont Agency of Education, 2013). One programmatic change that supports the new level of personalization is the implementation of student-led conferences (SLCs). Using this conferencing format schools can encourage student engagement in their learning while further enhancing family-school partnerships (Benson & Barnett, 1999).

The Pilot for SLCs

In the fall of 2013, the Family School Partnership I-Team developed a grant to fund a pilot study for student-led conferences at three Vermont Schools: Burlington High School, Edmunds Middle School and Winooski Middle-High School.

The pilot required participants to partake in two training sessions, develop protocols and lessons for planning, executing the conferences with at least 80% of their target population, gather data and reflect on the conferences. The results speak for themselves.

Student-Led Conferences

There were, of course variations on the conferences matching function and format to schools where the conferences were held. Some conferences were held with advisors, some with team teachers and some with teachers of specific disciplines such as math or Spanish. In some conferences with younger students, teachers had a greater role in guiding the conference. With some of the older students, such as those in Tom Payeur's math class at Winooski High School, students actually taught their parents math as well as discussed their learning.

As could be expected, both parents and teachers had questions about the implementation of the program at first. As simple as it sounds, SLCs actually require much more preparation than just bringing the student along to the standard parent conference. Critical to the success of these conferences is the preparation that precedes the conference event. Veteran teachers Meg O'Donnell from Shelburne Community School and Laura Botte from Edmunds Middle School admit that the most challenging aspect of SLCs is the preparation.

Planning and Preparing for Conferences

The key to a successful conference is to articulate a plan for preparation that includes a timeline for creating and gathering materials, ongoing opportunities for

formal reflection about learning, and notifications to students and parents. When students know ahead of time that the conferences will utilize artifacts of work they can archive that work in a timely manner.

Teachers or advisors must establish the initial structure, such as a portfolio or learning journal, for students to archive and reflect on their work. Portfolios can take the form of a physical binder, journal or one of the many new options for electronic portfolios, but the essential guidelines are the same: include examples of work that demonstrate proficiency in different skill areas, demonstrate student reflection on the learning process and establish academic goals for achieving success. These guidelines also represent some of the essential products that will be found in the proposed Vermont personalized learning plans (PLPs). Some of the participants utilized class time or team time to organize the student portfolios while Winooski Middle School teacher and advisor, Chris Magistrale, utilized advisory time to prepare his students.

The Role of the Portfolio

In our research, we discovered one teacher that has been using portfolios with student-led parent conferences for over ten years is Meg O' Donnell from the Alpha Team at the Shelburne Community School in Shelburne, Vermont. Four -inch binders document her students' work in all core subjects, with prompts for student reflection on their strengths and challenges, and student goals. As I observed the Alpha Team in the spring of 2011, it was impressive to see how readily students archived their work and utilized free time to reflect and improve on the work in their binders. In *Changing the View: Student-Led Parent Conferences*, Austin observes "when students know their strengths and weaknesses, they are capable of making changes in their learning habits" (p. 41).

This year, the Lauran Botte and Katie Wyndorf from the Nia/Journey Team at Edmunds Middle School utilized Ibooks, an Ipad application, for developing their portfolios. The results included video, written work, art and both written and oral reflection. One parent commented that she appreciated "all the work that went into preparing for the conference and loved hearing her (daughter) talk about her experiences and goals - she is gaining confidence speaking about herself ...an important skill to have".

Students Discussing Their Learning

In some student-led parent conference formats, students run the whole show. They write the invitations to their parents to attend the conference, introduce the parents to the teachers, and present their work, with the teacher taking a much less active role in the conference. Data revealed that parents felt some of the students could use more practice in discussing their learning. In Pittsfield, NH where student-led conferences have been the norm for several years, students admitted that when they first started student-led conferences they were often nervous. They added,

however, that as they continued to develop their presentation skills year after year, they became more confident, a sentiment that was corroborated by the advisors.

By organizing and reflecting on their work, students develop the ability to discuss their learning and by leading the conferences students become proficient at describing their learning with an authentic audience. John Clarke, author of *Personalized Learning: Student-Designed Pathways to High School Graduation*, describes student voice as a necessary component of personalized education (Clarke, 2013). After attending his daughter's student-led parent conference, one parent commented that he appreciated hearing his daughter describe her learning and goals in *her* manner of speaking. "When students have this kind of voice to express personal perspective, it creates student agency" (Brodie, 2014, p. 20).

Results of the Pilot Study

There was overwhelming evidence from the study that parents felt their student had a clearer understanding of what their child had learned (81%), that their child was well-prepared (84%) and that they had gained skills by utilizing this format (84%). The level of positive feedback received from the parents echoed that of the teachers who participated in the pilot. As students develop the skill of evaluating and improving their own work "teaching is vastly more rewarding" (Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997, p. 28) When asked if teachers would want to return to the previous format of holding traditional conferences between parents and teacher only, 100% of the teachers replied they would never go back.

When researching student-led conferences, Amy Dickson, a fellow for the Partnership for Change and veteran teacher of the Boston Public School system discussed her previous experience with student-led parent conferences: "to begin with, the parents love it". This was fully evident in this study as well. Our exit data revealed that 75 out of 87 parents surveyed preferred having their student lead the conference. Frequent comments reflected the sentiments of these parents: "I learned more about the way my child learns" and "(my child) showed her independence as well as her creative side. It was a pleasure".

Two parents did not prefer the student-led format citing that they wanted "time to get the teacher's perspective without my child in the room". One point to stress about student-led conferences is that it does not eliminate the option that a parent has at any time to request a parent-teacher conference to discuss concerns. In the case of that traditional twice a year conference, though, the student-led format is clearly more student-centered.

One of the strengths of the student-led parent conferences as expressed by one parent was "I like that when (my son) needed to make an improvement plan, all three of us were there making the plan. Let's face it, if they're not at the table, it's just a couple of adults talking". As Vermont moves toward personalized learning plans for middle and high school students, having all stakeholders at the table to prepare plans and discuss student learning will be equally as critical. Student-led

parent conferences will then have a significant role in effectively accomplishing Vermont's new level of personalization.

Works Cited

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Side note:

The Importance of Professional Development

Preparing teachers to implement student-led parent conferences is critical to the success of the program. Teachers in the pilot study found that being able to connect with veterans who have previous experience with implementation was extremely helpful. Additionally exemplars for timelines, letters of invitation to the parents, reflection protocols and conference protocols supported them in the implementation process. Having time to prepare for the conferences was also cited as being especially important to the success of the conferences.