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## Let students take the lead during parent conferences

Students are more successful when their parents are involved in their school. An easy way to increase parent involvement is to let students take the lead during parent-teacher conferences. Instead of nervously waiting outside a closed door or staying at home, students take an active role in leading the conference about their progress and behavior and encourage their parents to actively participate.

For fall conferences, students can help introduce parents to the school. At second semester conferences, they present portfolios with content they have assembled throughout the year. This should include their best work and an assessment of their performance.

The process helps students become better communicators as they tell parents about their classroom and what they are learning. It opens dialogue between parents and students and helps students take responsibility for their own progress and achievement. Teachers may facilitate one conference or several conferences in the same room, moving from group to group. A conference usually lasts 20-30 minutes.

### Before the conference

Each student is responsible for curating a portfolio. They assemble materials and practice their presentation. As students plan the conferences they look at their attendance records, think about how often they complete their work on time and how well they get along with others. They may also write a reflection on their grades and study habits.

Teachers work with students to plan what the students will say and the strengths and weaknesses they should identify. Students discuss the presentation with their teachers and determine what they will tell their parents about areas where they need improvement. They may want to ask their parents in advance of the conference for particular topics they want to hear about during the conference.

To prepare, provide a list of questions for the student and the parent. Teachers can incorporate them into the presentation structure or provide the questions at the start of the conference. Questions could cover attitude toward school, homework, home support, social skills and peer relationships, goals, etc. Find a sample questions from [www.edutopia.org: https://edutopia.org/to/2YhE5vY](http://www.edutopia.org/to/2YhE5vY).

This experience teaches communication skills as they learn how to issue a written and oral invitation to the conference and how to explain the difference between this conference and the traditional parent-teacher conference. The teacher may want to include a memo telling more about the conference and why it is important to student learning.

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Students who will participate in student-led conferences have an opportunity to practice speaking and presentation skills as they take part in role playing sessions designed to help them be ready to present their personal progress reports. Schools may want to involve volunteers and other students as members of practice or coaching teams.

### **During the conference**

Students greet their parents, introduce them to the teacher and serve as hosts for the conference. The teacher may join the discussion of the student's progress in all subjects. Parents who have attended student-led conferences express surprise at their students' insights into their work, how much their children are learning and how much they learn about their children's school day.

The format often opens lines of communication between parents and students after the conference as well. Parents and students often find that a student-led conference opened the door to a continuing dialogue about school and schoolwork.

### **After the conference**

Students and their families should be asked to evaluate how the conferences went, what went well and what should change. Students can extend their social and writing skills by writing a thank you note to their parents that summarizes the discussion and student goals that were discussed.

Schools should accommodate parents who also want time alone with a teacher to discuss specific needs without the student in attendance. This can be handled by setting aside time at the end of each set of student-led conferences for parents who need to meet with the teacher, or by arranging additional meeting times.

### **Make this a positive experience for all students**

This conference experience can be very disappointing to students whose parents or guardians cannot attend. Plan ahead for this scenario. To ensure that students benefit from the practice and experience, consider ways to hold a virtual conference, allow a student to record a presentation or present to family members at home and report back to the teacher on a simple form they all sign.

In some cases, a relative or family friend may be able to attend for the family. This could be an opportunity to gain support for your school by involving people who ordinarily would not be involved. It can turn people who may have had little or no contact with your school into supporters of your programs.

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*Contributed by Marcia Latta, communications consultant*