

Building the relationships with honest, affirming comments about their offspring goes a long way to helping parents listen when we have to offer news that is not so great or advice that is hard to hear. Both types of communication are sometimes necessary in working for the benefit of the student.

A dynamic opportunity for having a conversation and/or building relationships is the parent conference. Student-led conferences (SLCs) are undoubtedly one of the most successful educational strategies available, but they should not take the place of conversations between teachers and parents. Conversations with parents reinforce both parties' concern for the student and a mutual willingness to act as resources going forward.

Involving parents in our goal to provide a challenging, engaging, caring, safe environment for students only makes sense. They are a huge part of the success equation for their kids, and they are an integral part of how joyful our teaching experience is. Several of the ideas for relationship building in Chapters 3 and 4 can also be applied to parents and guardians.

STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES: BUILDING A CULTURE OF RELATIONSHIP, COMMUNICATION, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

While we definitely want teachers to have significant conversations with the parents, we also think it is our job to help parents have meaningful conversations with their offspring. SLCs force students to set their own goals and outline their plans to meet those goals.

SLCs are something that all grade levels, PreK–12, and schools should seriously consider. They help build a better relationship between teachers and students and between students and parents. They give more ownership and more responsibility to the student and give them an opportunity to have a voice and choice in their education.

STUDENT-LED CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

Students as young as kindergarten participate in SLCs all around the United States. Each age level can show progress in learning and share information about what material has been mastered, what still needs work. Students can use paper or electronic portfolios. SLCs hold very little resemblance to traditional parent-teacher conferences. Let parents and students know well in advance about the change in format.

The goal is to have the student lead the conference, show his or her work, answer questions, set goals and provide a tentative action plan. It is important that both parents and students be prepared for SLCs.

- Student preparation includes selecting three or four examples that show work accomplished, progress made, hurdles to overcome; writing a script (detailed or loose, depending on the student's age and confidence level); and practicing their presentations in front of another student.
- Parent preparation includes their receiving a clear description of how the conference will work; formulating two or three guiding questions to ask during the conference; and understanding the demand that the conference be completely positive.
- Sometimes a demonstration of a classroom activity is useful to assist parents in understanding the work.

Teachers Note: Let the student lead the conference. You are there simply to facilitate the student's presentation and ensure that the student's work is honored. Be clear that behavioral or social issues or other parental concerns should be discussed at another time. Do not show grades until the very end of the meeting.

- After the conferences are completed, have students send thank-you notes to their parents for attending. This note might also review the goals and action plan offered at the conference (e.g., "I agreed to check over my work before I turned it in, to devote an extra 10 minutes every day to reading, and to make sure I turn my work in on the day assigned").

As you can see, this is merely an overview. We would encourage you as an individual teacher or team of teachers to use the principles of optimism to plan for SLCs. SLCs can have a huge impact for you as the educator and for your students. For more resources and a readiness quiz, see "Student-Led Conferences" in the Appendix, page 157.

THE COMMUNITY: "IT TAKES A VILLAGE"

Okay, we're a little tired of that "takes a village" slogan, too, but there is a certain truth to it. Successful schools can help build positive communities, and likewise, healthy, thriving communities can help influence positive schools. Even though parents and guardians are part of the larger community in which your school functions, statistically, it is likely that fewer than 30 percent of the households in your community have a child in school. As a result, most the adults in your area have no clue what is happening there.