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## An analysis of fourth grade parents' perceptions of student-led conferences

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AN ANALYSIS OF  
FOURTH GRADE PARENTS'  
PERCEPTIONS OF  
STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES

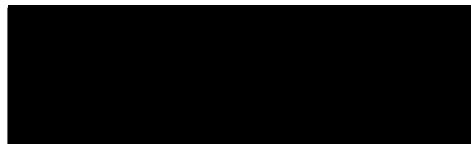
MASTER'S THESIS

Submitted to the School of Education  
University of Dayton, in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Science in Education

by

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April 13, 1998


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## Dedication

This research project is dedicated to my husband, Eric, for his support and encouragement throughout my whole master's program.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

#### Purpose for the Study

In school districts across the country the fall season brings parent-teacher conferences. Traditionally, parents, teachers, and students view conferences as an opportunity for teachers to tell parents about their child (Harper, Nelson, & Mayfield, 1997). This scenario often yields less than successful conferences for all parties. Many teachers lack training in how to effectively conduct conferences with parents (Enoch, 1996). Parents may resent being "told" about their child. In addition, if parents have had negative experiences as students, they may feel intimidated when attending conferences (Nielsen & Finkelstein, 1993; Spann, 1994). Finally, students "are present only as amalgams of test scores, pen-and-paper achievements, and an art project or two" (Moyers, 1994a, p. 64). Thus, conferences have traditionally been conducted as one-sided conversations where the subject of the conversation is not even present.

The real purpose of parent-teacher conferencing is not to merely "tell" parents about their child. On the contrary, conferences offer a valuable opportunity to establish rapport with parents as well as, "gain confidence of parents, and reassure students that the school cares about their success" (Mann, 1996, p. 16). Therefore, many teachers are beginning to restructure their conferences to ensure that all parties are active participants in the process. Student-led conferences are beginning to become popular because they call for everyone to participate, and no party is excluded.

As with traditional conferences, the student is the primary focus in a student-led conference. They differ from traditional conferences in that the student is actually

present and conducting the conference as well. This is only logical because educators and parents expect students to be responsible for their own progress, yet students are not usually included in the conferencing and evaluating process (Hackmann, 1996).

This, however, is not the case in the student-led format. Students conducting their own conferences must select and evaluate work samples from their portfolios, assess their behavior and social skills, set goals, determine their strengths and weaknesses, and be able to effectively communicate this to their parents. Teachers must provide the structure and support that will enable students to prepare for this type of conference. In addition, teachers serve as facilitators during the conference. The parents' role is to be supportive of their child. Parents can be given a list of possible questions to ask their student during the conference. All parties work together to set common goals (Robinson, 1997) that are specific to the individual child and his/her character, needs, and potential (Sizer, 1986).

Student-led conferences appear to be a more authentic and useful method of sharing a student's progress than traditional parent-teacher conferences. In addition, this type of conference is said to actively involve students in their education, increase self-esteem, and improve student-parent communication. Furthermore, student-led conferences allow students to feel more accountable for their achievement and provide parents with a better understanding of the teacher-student relationship. Therefore, this study was conducted to determine if these perceptions are accurate.

### Problem Statement

The purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of fourth grade parents who have participated in student-led conferences.

### Assumptions

A Likert-type survey was used to conduct this study on fourth grade parent perceptions toward student-led conferences. The author assumes that the instrument is reliable. The author assumes that the parents answered in an honest manner.

### Limitations

This study had several limitations. One limitation of this study was the sample size of the parents surveyed. Forty-four surveys were handed out, and thirty-nine surveys were completed. Another limitation was that all subjects were parents of students from the same classroom. In addition, there were nine more surveys completed by mothers than there were completed by fathers. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized. A final limitation of this study was that the subjects had only two experiences with student-led conferences.

### Definition of Terms

Student-led Conferences. This is the practice of students playing the primary role in evaluating all aspects of their schoolwork and presenting their findings to their parents in a conference setting (Denby, 1995). The student actually controls the agenda of the conference with the parents' role being that of supporter, and the teacher's role being that of a facilitator.

Parent-teacher Conference. This type of conference is one in which a teacher meets with parents to review their student's progress. Traditionally the student is not present, and the teacher does most of the talking.

Portfolios. Portfolios are collections of students' work selected by the student and/or the teacher "to represent the students' efforts, progress, and achievements over

time” (Young, Mathews, Kietzmann, & Westerfield, 1997, p. 349). They may also contain the student’s evaluations of his/her work.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Rationale for Student-Led Conferences

Teachers, parents, and students often view traditional parent-teacher conferences with dread. This "overall dissatisfaction with the present conference system" (Guyton & Fielstein, 1989 p. 169) is due to several reasons. Time constraints are obstacles that hinder the conferencing process. "The arbitrary time limits of these meetings often leave many concerns about students' academic achievement, behavior, and social adjustment untouched, causing unnecessary stress for both parents and teachers" (Johnson, 1996, p. 44). Hence, lack of time can prevent conferences from achieving their purpose of communicating a child's progress.

Teachers often cite lack of parental involvement (Hackmann, 1996) as a reason for the ineffectiveness of conferences. Parents, on the other hand, feel excluded from the process. Harper et al. (1997) describe the parents' experience as sitting silently while the teacher shares his/her assessment which is "based on, at best, a few months of experience" (p. 28). In addition, parents are put in the position of trying to reconcile what the teacher is saying with what their child has said. "This generally places them and the teachers on the defensive, blocking open communications and better understanding" (Le Countryman & Schroeder, 1996, p. 64).

Another rationale for student-led conferences is to eliminate what many teachers view as an apathetic attitude among students (Guyton & Fielstein, 1989). This apathy probably stems from students not feeling a part of the process. In fact, students are often dissatisfied with the conferencing process because they sense that conferences serve "as

an opportunity for parents and teachers to 'talk behind their backs'" (Hackmann, 1996, p. 31). Including students in the conferences can help students realize "that evaluation is not something done to [them]; rather, it is part of the learning and teaching process" (Santa, 1995, p. 92).

However, it is not enough to merely have students be present during the conference. Students need to be active participants in the planning and the conducting of the conference. If teachers want to alleviate student apathy, then students must be included in the process. Educators "know that when students engage in self-evaluation, they become more interested in, and responsible for, their own learning" (Enz & Serafini, 1995, p. 96). Thus, student-led conferences serve as a means of fostering a sense of accountability within the student (Hubert, 1989).

### Components of Student-Led Conferences

Student-led conferences are quite a departure from traditional parent-teacher conferences. Therefore, it is essential that parents are well prepared for the experience. As Moyers (1994a, p.65) suggests, teachers should begin by writing a "fairly detailed letter to parents that paints a picture of what student-led conferences are like and their benefits." Additionally, parents should be informed of what their own responsibilities are. Their primary role is to be that of listener. Parents must understand that the student is playing the principal role in the conference (Denby, 1995). As a result, the parents' role is to listen to the child's comments about his/her work, and wait until the appropriate time to offer their input. Finally, parents need to know that there is the opportunity for a traditional parent-teacher conference if they should still want one after the student-led conference.

Many student-led conferences are centered on the child's portfolio folder.

Throughout the year, students collect samples of their work in a portfolio. At conference time teachers offer the students guidance in organizing their folder. There are many ways to present the portfolio during the conference. Some teachers might "ask children to choose samples of work from specific assignments and curriculum areas and to include favorite pieces of writing and works of art" (Santa, 1995, p. 92). This guidance allows the students to easily select the pieces they will evaluate and share during their conference.

Upon choosing samples of their work, students set about evaluating the pieces. This evaluation is paramount because too often children feel that evaluation is something done *to* them (Santa, 1995). Allowing students the opportunity to evaluate their work gives them a sense of ownership. In fact, teachers also benefit from the students evaluating their work. As Rief (1990) explains, "As teachers, we must listen first to the perceptions our students have of themselves-and address what they think they can and cannot do" (p.27). Student-led conferences afford teachers the opportunity to gauge students' opinions of their work.

Apart from the evaluation of their academic work, student-led conferences ask the students to "actively evaluate all aspects of their schoolwork" (Denby, 1996, p. 378). This includes behavior, homework habits, and interactions with peers. Often times a student's success or lack thereof is affected by one or more of the aforementioned areas. It is only appropriate that they examine these areas and assess their performance. Teachers have found that many students are extremely forthright with their evaluations and at times are even "too hard on themselves" (Denby, 1996, p. 379). Of course the

point is not for the students to judge themselves too harshly. On the contrary, the student's assessment is a means to conducting a dialogue between the student, his/her parents, and teacher about the child's perceptions of his/her performance at school.

Generating a list of questions is another way students prepare for their conferences. Students compose a list of questions to answer before they conduct their conference (Kasse, 1994). Questions may be about specific academic areas, a specific goal a child has, or information a child wants to tell his/her parents. These questions help a student determine what he/she wants a parent to know. The answers serve as a reminder to the student of what to be sure and include in his/her student-led conference.

Some student-led conferences include a formal invitation to the parents from the student. The invitations explain the purpose of the event and some of what the parents can expect. Naturally, the invitations include the date, time, and place as well. An invitation signifies "the importance of the event" (Little & Allan, 1989, p. 212) and lets parents know that this is not merely an "open house".

An essential component of the student-led conference is the actual practice of conducting the conference. Teachers begin by modeling what a conference looks like "from the time they greet their parents...until the time they say goodbye" (Moyers, 1994b, p. 59). Students often pair up with a classmate and practice what they will say and how they will share their information. As Moyers (1994b) explains, this practice not only serves as preparation for the conference, but also alleviates some of the anxiety the children may be experiencing (p.58).

One of the most important parts of the student-led conference is when students and parents work together to develop goals. Traditional conferences usually do not

include an opportunity for goal setting between parent and child. Because student-led conferences employ portfolios, and a lot of self-evaluation, parents are able to see their child's perception of his/her academic world. Thus, both the parent and child can "develop active solutions to problems" (Rump & Spann, 1992, p. 55).

Student-led conferences can be organized in a variety of ways. The important thing to remember is that there is no one way to design them. Teachers, students, and parents must find the manner that best suits them and their needs.

### Benefits of Student-Led Conferences

Students that participate in student-led conferences are actively involved in their education. When students are asked to collect and evaluate work samples as well as assess their behavior, study habits, and social interactions, "their interest and efforts in learning [increase, and they] gain greater control over their own performance" (Van Reusen & Bos, 1994, p. 466). As a result, students have an increased sense of accountability about their work. This is paramount because educators want to communicate to their students that they believe the students can be responsible and show leadership (Little & Allan, 1989).

Student-led conferences are also beneficial because they allow children to develop and hone their communication skills. A large part of the whole process is preparing and practicing what will be said. Consequently, students have an improved "self-confidence with their oral communication skills" (Hackmann, 1996, p. 31). Parents are also impressed with the astute observations their children are able to make and articulate about their academic progress.

Teachers and parents that have been a part of student-led conferences have remarked that "these conferences vest children with status" (Raymond, 1995, p. 27) and have a positive affect on students' self-esteem. Students that are involved in this type of conference learn very quickly "that their opinions and ideas matter" (Rump & Spann, 1992, p. 55). Therefore, student-led conferences are quite often an empowering experience for the students.

Student-led conferences afford the students and parents a better means of communicating about the students' schoolwork. Teachers have found that many parents listen quite intently to their children during the conference. Upon listening to the child's presentation, parents often "asked probing questions about work habits, successes, difficulties, relations with peers and teachers, and school behavior" (Denby, 1996, p. 378). Once parents have an understanding of their child's academic and social progress, they are able to communicate more effectively with their child about all aspects of school.

Finally, student-led conferences provide the students, parents, and teachers with a better working relationship. As mentioned before, traditional conferences don't allow for the most effective means of communicating a student's progress. With traditional conferences "students typically are forced to sit at home, anxiously awaiting the results of the latest meeting" (Hackmann, 1996, p. 31). Parents are then forced to relay the teacher's report to their child. Consequently, these circumstances make it difficult to promote an honest dialogue among students, parents, and teachers (Hackmann, 1996). However, "with all participants present, misunderstandings [are] kept at a minimum" (Hubert, 1989, p. 30).

### Disadvantages of Student-Led Conferences

Obviously, student-led conferences are not without their shortcomings. One concern parents have is that they will not have an opportunity to speak privately with the teacher. This is a legitimate worry. There are times when teachers and parents need to have a private discussion. To address this concern, teachers often provide parents with the option of holding a private conference in addition to the student-led conference. Often times, "parents will have their concerns quelled and questions answered during the student-led conference. And even if they do request a traditional conference, it's generally enriched by what happens during the student-led one" (Moyers, 1994a, p. 66). Thus, there is a time and a place for traditional conferences, and parents should have the option of having one.

Another disadvantage of student-led conferences is the amount of preparation they require. Teachers and students are not only compiling information on academic progress, but also behavior, goals, and peer relationships. Upon gathering the necessary information, students must evaluate and reflect upon the information. Of course for the initial conference, teachers must model for their students how to do all of this, which takes a great deal of time. Therefore, some teachers may be reticent to begin the process because of the time commitment it involves. In addition, students can view the conferences as a rather daunting task to complete.

The actual conferences pose another disadvantage. The students have so much information to share that there can be a problem of not having enough time to adequately cover all of the data. Some teachers address this matter by holding several conferences at once. This allows them to circulate the room and answer any questions that the parents

may have. While this is a solution, it does come at the expense of the students' privacy when conducting their conferences.

Finally, student-led conferences can be a less than positive experience when teachers and parents want to "take over" the conference. Teachers must resist the temptation to "run the show" (Moyers, 1994a, p. 65). Their role is to be that of silent supporter, and only to intervene if it is necessary. Parents also must let their child be the leader. As Moyers (1994a) explains, teachers can help with this by delicately telling parents beforehand that "if they sit back, are observant, and let the child take charge, they'll learn a lot" (p. 66). It is not always easy for teachers or parents to give their students this much latitude, but it is essential in having an effective student-led conference.

For many parents, students, and teachers, traditional parent-teacher conferences are not an effective way to communicate about a child's progress. For too long parents and students have not been active participants in the process. Student-led conferences attempt to address this problem by having the students prepare for and actually lead the conference with their parents and teacher. Studies have indicated that student-led conferences are in general a preferable way to communicate a student's progress to his/her parents.

## CHAPTER III

### PROCEDURE

#### Subjects

The subjects in this study were the parents of twenty-five fourth grade students. There were twenty-four mothers and fifteen fathers that responded to the survey.

#### Setting

School. This study was conducted in a suburban elementary school in southwestern Ohio. The school has an enrollment of approximately eight hundred students. The student body is predominantly Caucasian and from middle to upper middle class homes. Students traditionally do well on standardized tests and, as a whole, are motivated learners. Additionally, there is high degree of parental involvement in the school. Parents routinely volunteer in the school, and school functions are well attended.

Community. The study took place in a moderate size community. Citizens of this community are informed and very involved in the education of their children. The community has traditionally been very supportive of the school district but has recently turned down two proposed tax levies.

#### Data Collection

Construction of the Data Collection Instrument. A Likert-type scale was used in the study's questionnaire. It was chosen for its easy construction and use as well as its appropriateness in assessing attitudes. As Isaac and Michael (1995) point out, this type of scale is "easier to develop and yield(s) the same information as the more laboriously constructed equal-appearing interval scale."

The first four questions on the survey were designed to gauge the accuracy of the purported benefits of student-led conferences that is written in much of the research. The remaining three questions were intended to obtain parents' opinions on their particular conference experience.

An initial field test of the survey with five parents resulted in several changes. The directions on the survey were changed for the sake of clarity. An additional choice of "legal guardian" was added. Initially the survey had questions that were about student-led conferences in general and questions that were about that particular parent's experience with student-led conferences. The revised survey was comprised solely of questions that pertain to the individual parent's experience with the conference. Additional changes included eliminating the first number one, deleting question number four, and adding different wording to questions two and seven. A suggestion to include a section for student attitudes was not included because it is not the purpose of this study.

Administration of the Data Collecting Instrument. Prior to completing the survey, parents participated in a twenty-five minute student-led conference. The students followed an agenda that began with greeting their parents and thanking them for attending the conference. Next, the students shared their conference packet that included several different evaluations.

The first evaluation was the students' assessment of their behavior. The students compared how many disciplinary steps they had received the second grading period as opposed to the first. Students also provided a rationale for their behavior and a description of what their parents could expect from them for the final grading period. The second assessment was on homework completion. Again the students compared

their performance of the last two grading periods, provided rationale for their performance, and explained their plan for success in the third grading period. Very similar evaluations were done on the students' weekly mathematics timed tests and grammar quizzes.

The students also completed an assessment of the goals they had set for themselves. Students shared with their parents the academic and personal goals they set in November. They explained their success, or lack thereof, in accomplishing these goals and set challenging, yet realistic goals for the final grading period.

Students also shared samples of work from their portfolios. The children chose five pieces of their work that represented their best work, favorite work, room for improvement work, and two free choices. The five pieces had to represent at least three different subject areas. Students shared the pieces with their parents as well as a paragraph that they wrote about each piece. The paragraph included why they chose that work sample, what the assignment was, and what they thought about their piece.

The last item the students shared was their "personal reflections" sheet. This sheet was the students' own representation of the last grading period. They were to draw pictures, write poems, make a collage, or do anything that showed what the second grading period meant to them.

Finally, the conferences ended with the students answering any questions their parents had and again thanking them for attending the conference. After the student and his/her parents were finished, the teacher asked the parents for any questions and added comments of her own regarding the child's progress. Finally, the teacher presented each parent attending the conference with the survey and requested they complete the survey

and return it to school with their child. A total of forty-four surveys were handed out to the parent or parents of twenty-seven students. Twenty-five students returned a total of thirty-nine surveys.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### Presentation of the Results

The results of the Likert-type questionnaire were organized in two ways. First, the results of the question portion of the survey were compiled into three different tables. The results of all the surveys are shown in Table One. Next, the results of the mothers and fathers were tabulated to allow for comparison between the two groups. Tables Two and Three illustrate these results. Finally, the written comment portion of the survey was categorized as follows: concerns about student-led conferences, benefits of student-led conferences, and suggestions on improving student-led conferences. These comments were put in Table Four.

On the survey questions, parent responses indicated that overall they agreed with the statements. In particular, parents agreed with questions one, three, and six. There was less consensus on questions two, four, five, and seven.

Approximately 87% of the parents felt that student-led conferences can help their child develop a better sense of ownership in his/her work. Nearly 67% of the parents also agreed, but not as readily, that these conferences enabled them to communicate more effectively with their child about his/her work.

When responding to the statement "I think it was beneficial for my child to assess his/her academic performance," 95% of the parents agreed. Yet, when asked if the process enabled their child to build his/her self-esteem, 77% of the parents agreed.

As to whether or not their child enjoyed conducting the student-led conference, 80% of the parents agreed their child enjoyed the experience, 15% were unsure, and 5% disagreed that their child enjoyed the experience.

Of the parents surveyed, 92% agreed with their child's evaluation of his/her progress, while 8% were unsure. Finally, 74% of the parents agreed that they would like to do student-led conferences again, 13% were unsure, and 13% would not like to do them again.

When comparing the surveys of mothers and fathers, there was a significant difference in how they perceived five of the questions. More mothers (70%) than fathers (60%) believed that student-led conferences enabled them to communicate more effectively with their child about his/her schoolwork. As to the benefit of the student assessing his/her academic performance, all of the fathers agreed while 91% of the mothers agreed. A total of 9% of the mothers disagreed that it was beneficial for their child to assess his/her academic performance. On the issue of student-led conferences enhancing a child's self-esteem, 87% of the fathers agreed that they did build self-esteem while 71% of the mothers agreed.

Mothers agreed that their students enjoyed leading a conference at a rate of 83% while fathers agreed at a rate of 73%. More fathers (80%) than mothers (70%) said they would like to do student-led conferences again, but an equal amount of 13% would not like to do them again.

In addition to the seven questions the parents responded to, there was a section for parents to write their comments about student-led conferences. Eighteen of the respondents wrote comments. These comments fell into three categories: concerns of

student-led conferences, benefits of student-led conferences, and suggestions for improving student-led conferences. Table Four shows the results of the written comment section of the survey. Since many parents expressed the same thoughts, not every statement written was included in the table.

### Discussion of the Results

All of the responses discussed are from the experience of one group of parents in one school. These results do not indicate how other parents who have experienced student-led conferences may feel about the process.

The questionnaire completed by parents indicates that overall they have positive perceptions regarding student-led conferences. There are some differences, however, between the perceptions of the mothers and fathers. When comparing the results of these two groups it is important to keep in mind that there were nine more surveys completed by mothers than fathers. Therefore, the generalizations that are made regarding the results of these two groups cannot be extended beyond the experiences of these particular parents.

The survey responses show that parents felt that it was important for their children to assess their academic progress, and they agreed with their children's assessments. However, when comparing the mothers and fathers, 100% of the fathers thought it was beneficial for the child to assess his/her academic performance, while 91% of the mothers found it beneficial. The 9% of the mothers that disagreed with this indicated in their written comments that they felt that too much class time was spent on preparing for the conferences. Perhaps this is why they did not feel it was beneficial for the students to assess their performance.

Eighty-seven percent of the parents agreed that student-led conferences could help their child develop a better sense of ownership in his/her work. This result is comparable to the outcome Guyton & Fielstein (1989) reported in their study. They found that "...students were more likely to assume ownership for grades and academic progress" (p.171) when they conducted student-led conferences.

Along with developing a sense of ownership in one's work, 77% of the parents perceived the student-led conference process as a way of building their child's self-esteem. Fathers agreed with this concept more than the mothers did, however. Eighty-seven percent of the fathers perceived the conferences as a means of enhancing self-esteem, whereas 71% of the mothers agreed. Interestingly, while fewer mothers than fathers indicated that the conferences could build self-esteem, more mothers than fathers felt that their children enjoyed leading the conference. In fact, 83% of the mothers agreed their child enjoyed the experience, while 73% of the fathers agreed. Therefore, one could surmise that these parents did not see a relationship between enjoying the conferences and it building self-esteem. This is contrary to what both Little & Allen (1989) and Guyton & Fielstein (1989) reported in their studies. They found that student-led conferences are enjoyable for students because they give the students the opportunity to handle adult responsibilities, thus enhancing their self-esteem.

Parents, particularly the fathers, were less sure that student-led conferences enabled them to communicate more effectively with their child about his/her schoolwork. This may be attributed to the parents' desire to have more teacher input. The written comments indicated that for the most part the parents were not satisfied with the level of teacher feedback. Thus, it appears that parents view the teacher's perceptions as a

necessary component for communicating effectively with their child about his/her schoolwork.

Overall, 74% of the parents stated they would like to do student-led conferences again, 13% were unsure, and 13 % would not like to do them again. When comparing the mothers and fathers, 80% of the fathers were in favor of doing them again as opposed to 70% of the mothers. Based on the written comments, more parents would probably like to do the conferences again if there were more teacher input during the conference.

The surveys completed by this group of parents suggest that they found student-led conferences to be a worthwhile process. Overall, they agreed with all of the questions. However, the parents' written comments offer valuable insight as to what they feel could improve the process. Parent feedback is an integral part to making student-led conferences work. Different populations of students and parents have different needs. Therefore, it is imperative to gauge the parents' opinions to ensure that their expectations and needs are being met.

Table One  
PARENTS' ATTITUDES  
TOWARD STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES  
QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Survey Question	N	SA	A	U	D	SD
1. A student-led conference can help my child develop a better sense of ownership in his/her work.	38	47.4% (18)	39.5% (15)	7.9% (3)	2.6% (1)	2.6% (1)
2. A student-led conference enables the parents to communicate more effectively with their child about his/her schoolwork.	38	26.3% (10)	39.5% (15)	13.2% (5)	18.4% (7)	2.6% (1)
3. I think it was beneficial for my child to assess his/her academic performance.	38	39.5% (15)	55.3% (21)		2.6% (1)	2.6% (1)
4. Conducting a student-led conference enables my child to build his/her self-esteem.	39	38.5% (15)	38.5% (15)	15.4% (6)	5.1% (2)	2.6% (1)
5. I think my child enjoyed conducting a student-led conference.	39	41% (16)	38.5% (15)	15.4% (6)	2.6% (1)	2.6% (1)
6. Overall, I agreed with my child's evaluation of his/her academic and social progress.	39	30.8% (12)	61.5% (24)	7.7% (3)		
7. I would like to do student-led conferences again.	38	34.2% (13)	39.5% (15)	13.2% (5)	7.9% (3)	5.3% (2)

Table Two  
MOTHERS' ATTITUDES  
TOWARD STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES  
QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Survey Question	N	SA	A	U	D	SD
1. A student-led conference can help my child develop a better sense of ownership in his/her work.	23	47.8% (11)	39.1% (9)	8.7% (2)		4.3% (1)
2. A student-led conference enables the parents to communicate more effectively with their child about his/her schoolwork.	23	26.1% (6)	43.5% (10)	13% (3)	13% (3)	4.3% (1)
3. I think it was beneficial for my child to assess his/her academic performance.	23	43.5% (10)	47.8% (11)		4.3% (1)	4.3% (1)
4. Conducting a student-led conference enables my child to build his/her self-esteem.	24	41.7% (10)	29.2% (7)	20.8% (5)	4.2% (1)	4.2% (1)
5. I think my child enjoyed conducting a student-led conference.	24	41.7% (10)	41.7% (10)	12.5% (3)		4.2% (1)
6. Overall, I agreed with my child's evaluation of his/her academic and social progress.	24	37.5% (9)	54.2% (13)	8.2% (2)		
7. I would like to do student-led conferences again.	23	39.1% (9)	30.4% (7)	17.4% (4)	4.3% (1)	8.7% (2)

Table Three  
FATHERS' ATTITUDES  
TOWARD STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES  
QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Survey Question	N	SA	A	U	D	SD
1. A student-led conference can help my child develop a better sense of ownership in his/her work.	15	40% (6)	46.7% (7)	6.7% (1)	6.7% (1)	
2. A student-led conference enables the parents to communicate more effectively with their child about his/her schoolwork.	15	26.7% (4)	33.3% (5)	13.3% (2)	26.7% (4)	
3. I think it was beneficial for my child to assess his/her academic performance.	15	33.3% (5)	66.7% (10)			
4. Conducting a student-led conference enables my child to build his/her self-esteem.	15	26.7% (4)	60% (9)	6.7% (1)	6.7% (1)	
5. I think my child enjoyed conducting a student-led conference.	15	40% (6)	33.3% (5)	20% (3)	6.7% (1)	
6. Overall, I agreed with my child's evaluation of his/her academic and social progress.	15	20% (3)	73.3% (11)	6.7% (1)		
7. I would like to do student-led conferences again.	15	26.7% (4)	53.3% (8)	6.7% (1)	13.3% (2)	

Table Four  
PARENTS' ATTITUDES  
TOWARD STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES  
WRITTEN COMMENTS

Concerns About Student-Led Conferences

- I think that the amount of class time spent preparing could have been spent on academics.
- I didn't feel that there was enough time to stop him and start a dialogue about things I may have disagreed with him about.
- I feel the behavior assessment should be dropped. I think it is belittling to the child – the behavior problems should be addressed as they occur.
- I would have preferred the teacher's perspective, as I believe these were supposed to be parent-teacher conferences, not parent-child.
- I think the student-led conference is used to avoid communicating with parents.
- I value your input, and we get so few opportunities to hear what you have to say that I'd like to hear more from you.
- We didn't need to set aside this time to have a discussion we already have regularly at home.
- How do we know if the work he is doing is up to par [with the] rest of [the] class?

Benefits of Student-Led Conferences

- I definitely agree that this student-led conference gives the student more responsibility, and it can be a positive experience.
- I believe the student-led conference helps the student learn how to organize, summarize, and focus on the areas they need to improve their effort.
- Action plans are an important tool used in the business community, and the student-led conference helps to teach students, at an early age, this method.
- I believe it was beneficial for [my daughter] to assess her performance.
- I believe that student-led conferences help to improve accountability and productivity.
- I love the fact that they are setting various types of goals and working to achieve them.
- They are carefully planned and involve much prep work on both parts.

Suggestions on Improving Student-Led Conferences

- I really would appreciate some time with you without [my son] in attendance.
- The teacher should take the lead at the end to summarize and emphasize areas for focus.
- Maybe one of the scheduled conferences should be student-led and the other teacher directed.

## Table Four continued

- How about having students answer only a couple of key questions and have teacher continue a normal conference?
- I prefer to have both the parents, teacher, and student all involved equally in sharing problems, accomplishments, ideas, and course of action for the future.
- [We] need more balance between the two techniques.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

Traditionally, the means of communication between teachers and parents has been through parent-teacher conferences. Typically, parents come to the school and meet briefly with their child's teacher to hear how their child is progressing at school. This scenario is not always successful due to the following reasons: many teachers lack training in conducting conferences, parents do not necessarily feel comfortable being "told" about their child, and most importantly, the reason for the conference, the student, is not present. Therefore, educators sought an alternative that would allow the conferencing process to meet the needs of the parents, teachers, and students.

The real purpose of parent-teacher conferencing is not to merely "tell" parents about their child. On the contrary, conferences offer a valuable opportunity to establish rapport with parents as well as, "gain confidence of parents, and reassure students that the school cares about their success" (Mann, 1996, p. 16). Therefore, many teachers are beginning to restructure their conferences to ensure that all parties are active participants in the process. Student-led conferences are beginning to become popular because they call for everyone to participate, and no party is excluded.

The purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of fourth grade parents who have participated in student-led conferences.

The subjects in this study were thirty-nine parents of twenty-five fourth grade students in a suburban elementary school in southwestern Ohio. The parents completed a Likert-type questionnaire after participating in a student-led conference with their fourth

grade student. The first four questions on the survey were designed to gauge the accuracy of the purported benefits of student-led conferences that is written in much of the research. The remaining three questions were intended to obtain parents' opinion on their particular conference experience.

The results from the questionnaire indicated that the parents agreed with what the research says are the benefits of student-led conferences. Parents agreed most readily with the importance of students evaluating their own academic performance. On the three questions that measured parental opinion, the results were again in support of the student-led conference experience.

Eighteen parents wrote comments on their questionnaires. Many of the parents expressed the same thoughts in this section. Overall, the comments were categorized into the following three groups: concerns about student-led conferences, benefits of student-led conferences, and suggestions on improving student-led conferences.

While the results of the mothers and fathers suggest that the two groups viewed the student-led conferences in a positive light, there was a significant difference on the degree to which they agreed on five of the questions.

The majority of the parents surveyed perceived the student-led conference experience to be a positive one.

### Conclusions

Overall, the parents in this study found value in the student-led conference process. Their survey results indicate that they agree that student-led conferences can improve a student's ownership in his/her work, improve a child's self-esteem, and enable the parents to communicate more effectively with their child about his/her schoolwork.

Yet, the data that are probably most useful are the written comments. Most telling are the comments pertaining to concerns about student-led conferences. These comments indicate that more teacher feedback should be incorporated into the student-led conference. Although a grade card and written comments went home prior to the student-led conference, and the teacher added her own comments to end the conference, parents were not satisfied with the amount of teacher input.

Part of the dissatisfaction may be because the parents are not accustomed to this type of conference. Additionally, since these were fourth grade students, it was the parents' first experience with intermediate level conferencing as opposed to primary level conferencing. Perhaps they were not prepared for their child to take such a dominant role, and were not convinced that it was appropriate for their child to have so much control. Nevertheless, due to the number of parents who indicated they would like more teacher involvement, it is apparent that this request should be addressed.

### Recommendations

Since the parents have rated the student-led conference as a positive experience, the teachers should continue to explore the process. It is imperative, however, that the parents' input be taken seriously and incorporated into the format of the student-led conferences.

Based on the parents' surveys, it is recommended that teachers provide more feedback during the conference. Teachers should survey parents before conferences about what type of feedback, in addition to academic feedback, would best meet their needs. For example, parents could indicate they want feedback on behavior, enrichment opportunities and/or the social progress of their child. To allow for more time for the

teacher and parents to interact, some of the students' presentation to their parents may need to be pared down.

It is also recommended that each group of parents complete questionnaires after participating in student-led conferences. Parental needs differ from group to group, and teachers should not assume that what is appropriate for one set of parents is appropriate for another. Continually monitoring how student-led conferences are conducted will only serve to improve the process and make it suitable for the needs of the students, parents and teachers.

## APPENDICES

## Student-Led Conference Parent Survey

Dear Parents,

Thank you for your support with student-led conferences. I appreciate your willingness to conduct conferences in this manner. I'm quite interested in hearing your opinions and comments regarding the conferences we have held this year. Please take a moment to answer the questions below. I would like for each parent/legal guardian that attended the conferences to complete a survey. Your child may return your survey to me. Again, thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kate Baca

I am a \_\_\_\_\_ mother/ \_\_\_\_\_ father/ \_\_\_\_\_ legal guardian of a fourth grader. (Check one, please.)

On the following questions please circle the letter that best describes your opinion. The letters represent the following phrases:

**SA**~ strongly agree

**A** ~ agree

**U** ~ undecided

**D** ~ disagree

**SD**~ strongly disagree

1. A student-led conference can help my child develop a better sense of ownership in his/her work.

**SA    A    U    D    SD**

2. A student-led conference enables the parents to communicate more effectively with their child about his/her schoolwork.

**SA    A    U    D    SD**

3. I think it was beneficial for my child to assess his/her academic performance.

**SA    A    U    D    SD**

4. Conducting a student-led conference enables my child to build his/her self-esteem.

**SA    A    U    D    SD**

5. I think my child enjoyed conducting a student-led conference.

**SA    A    U    D    SD**

6. Overall, I agreed with my child's evaluation of his/her academic and social progress.

**SA    A    U    D    SD**

7. I would like to do student-led conferences again.

**SA    A    U    D    SD**

Please share below any other comments you have regarding student-led conferences.

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