

# **Not Just Another Bandwagon: Student-Involved Conferences Support Learning and Enhance Communication With Parents**

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Over the last decade as the purpose of our classroom assessment has changed from sorting and classifying students to supporting all students' learning, many evaluation practices have undergone changes to come into alignment with the newly refocused purposes of schooling. Up until recently, most parent-teacher conferences were held after the reports were sent out and involved only parents and teachers.

During student-involved conferences students, their parents, and teachers meet to discuss their children's learning – everyone has a role to play. The students demonstrate what they know as they share their accomplishments, articulate their learning needs, and set new learning goals. The parents view work samples, have the opportunity to ask questions, express their ideas, and help make plans to support their child's learning at home. Teachers facilitate the conversations supporting the learners and their parents by clarifying, elaborating, and responding to specific questions and concerns.

There are many different kinds of student-involved conferences – two-way, three-way, showcase and the list goes on. Although the purpose of every kind of conference is to support student learning, teachers select a conference format that makes sense given the immediate function of the conference, the age of the students, and the kind of classroom and school community in which they learn.

Two-way or student-led conferences, which involve students and their parents, communicate to parents the breadth of learning in which their child is engaged as well as evidence of student progress over time.

Two-way conferences open a window for parents into their child's learning at school. Students and teachers are prepared to answer questions concerning progress and achievements. The purpose of this conference is to support students learning and communicate to parents about learning.

Three-way evaluation conferences typically begin with a two-way conference between the parents and child as they review work samples. Then, as the teacher joins the conference, the focus shifts to the student leading with a summary of personal learning strengths, areas needing improvement or challenge, and the setting of goals for upcoming learning. Everyone has a role to play. At this time the student explains what they know as they share accomplishments and detail areas needing improvement or challenge. The parents also identify their child's strengths and areas needing improvement or challenge. The teacher facilitates the three-way conversation by supporting the learners and their parents by clarifying, elaborating and responding to specific questions and concerns. Teachers assist the teacher input. The purpose of a three-way conference is to support student learning, communicate to parents, and set learning goals.

A showcase conference is a time when students describe their learning accomplishments over a term or a school year to a panel that may include their parents, other teachers from the school, their

peers, and community members. More formal in nature, this kind of student-involved conference typically involves older students. Showcase conferences give students an opportunity to highlight their accomplishments in a way that a collection of letter grades and computer generated comments can never do.

**FIGURE 1 – progress folio ideas**

<p><b>Reading</b> I chose this piece because...</p> <p><b>November</b></p>	<p><b>Reading</b> I chose this piece because...</p> <p><b>September</b></p>
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At the beginning of the year and then prior to the next of each reporting period, students work with teachers to select the best work at this point in their learning.

**Table of contents**

<p>Getting along Writing The Arts Project work</p>	<p>Reading Mathematics Physical Activity My Choices</p>
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The Progress folio can be organized around subjects, curriculum goals, or feature just one area of learning.

In order to ensure that student-involved conferences do support student learning, it is imperative that we ensure they are successful. During a five year research study parents, teachers, and students were asked to identify what helped conferences be successful and what got in the way of their success. Some of the keys that lead to success are:

**1. Collect evidence about learning**

Everything that occurs in a classroom is potential evidence. Evidence consists of observations of children at work, the products they create, and what they communicate in the conversations we have with them about their learning. One of the key pieces of advice given to us from parents who have participated in conferences was to help them see growth in their child's learning – to see evidence of progress. They want to know that being in school has made a difference for their child. Since it is sometimes difficult for parents to understand the significance of work samples, one of the practices we have found helpful is to display key pieces of student work collected over time in a progress folio to highlight the growth in learning that has occurred (Politano & Davies, 1994). The progress folio is reviewed before or during the conference.

## 2. Build in opportunities for students to self-assess

During conferences, students are asked to conduct a “tour” of their learning for parents, and answer questions. In order to be successful in their conferences, students need to know for themselves what they’ve been learning, what they are able to do and what they need to be able to do better next time. They need to have the language of self-assessment and evaluation. Fullan (1996) says, “An event is not an experience until you reflect upon it.” We want students to learn from their work in schools and therefore we are learning to build in regular opportunities for students to self-assess and set learning goals. Self-assessment means thinking – thinking about what you’ve done, what you’ve tried to do, and how you feel about what you’ve done. Classroom time and practice are essential to build confidence and develop positive learning habits.

### 3. Assist student to set learning goals.

During many conferences, students set goals for their future learning with their parents and the teacher. Goal setting focuses students’ learning. Goal setting needs to be taught. One way to begin is by setting goals with the whole class. It is useful to begin with questions such as, “What things would make this a better place to learn?” or “What kinds of things get in the way of your learning?” After brainstorming an initial list, ask students to put a checkmark beside the goal they think is most important. The goal that receives the most checks becomes the class goal for the week. A second list describing what could be done to reach the goal is developed. At the end of the week the students make a third list that records their progress and accomplishments towards the goal. The final step is to determine whether to reset the goal for another week or continue on another goal.

We’ve been learning about...

I used to think...

But now I know...

This shows

- risk-taking
- perseverance
- a process
- improvement
- collaboration
- a thoughtful response
- something unexpected
- something of personal significance

Please notice...

Next time I would...

Goal setting becomes a powerful learning tool when it is an integral part of the learning in classrooms. There are many right ways to integrate goal setting into your classroom program. Experiment with different methods. Find one that works for you and your students. Some ways to make goal setting part of your routine is by having group meetings, learning logs and daily or weekly goal setting (Gregory et al, In Press).

After lots of practice setting and resetting goals as a class, students are better able to prepare their individual goals in anticipation of conferences with teachers’ assistance. For example, one way to begin is to have students meet as a group and share all the goals they think are important. Each student then selects the goal he or she thinks is most important for him or her. These are recorded by students in their conference guides in anticipation of their upcoming conferences.

### 4. Find ways to help parents learn about their child’s learning.

If the evaluation conference is the first time students’ parents have viewed student work or considered their child’s strengths and areas needing improvement or challenge, the classroom teacher may be taking unnecessary risks. It is important to give parents the opportunity to review student work and respond before the conference. It is also important to build in opportunities to find out what questions or concerns your students’ parents have.

## Figure 2 – student self-reflection frames

This piece is an example of...

I want you to notice...

This piece of work shows how much I have improved in...

You can see this because...

I chose these samples because they show...

I used to...

And now I...

I am working towards...

A growing number of teachers are inviting parents and students to participate in goal setting conferences early in the year. During these conferences, parents and students assess the child's strengths and areas needing improvement or challenge. They share this information with the classroom teacher and together parents and the teacher help the student set goals for the year.

Other ways teachers have included parents is by having after-school conversations, having students take their work collections home to share with parents and asking parents to respond to their work, using "back and forth" books or "learning logs" that keep parents updated on classroom activities and invite parents to respond.

**FIGURE 3 – sample goal-setting frames**

**Class record sheet**

The goal	Evidence of meeting of goal	Resetting the goal

**Personal goal sheet**

My goal is	Because	I'll know I have accomplished this goal by/when

**FIGURE 4 – sample parent response forms**

(Child's name), I compliment you on your work samples. I/we especially liked.....

One thing I/we would like you to work on is...

During our upcoming conference, I/we would like to know more about..

Parent(s)/Guardian(s)

Dear (child's name):

In looking at your work so far, I/we would like to compliment you on...

The most important thing I/we would like to say to you now is....

As your parents(s), I/we...

Parent(s)/Guardian(s)

## 5. Prepare students, teachers, and parents for the conference.

While everything we do in our classrooms builds a foundation for a student-involved conference, there are some specific things that need to be done in order to set conferences up for success (Davies, Cameron, Politano & Gregory, 1992). They are summarized in Figure 5.

As Fullan (1991) has noted, systemic change occurs over time and brings about changes in the culture of the institution. As purposes change so must routines, rituals, and relationships between people. The definition, form, and function of sound classroom assessments has changed to ensure that all learners are supported in their learning and learn the habits of successful life-long learning.

In our experience, parents who have participated in student-involved conferences are overwhelmingly in support of including children in the evaluation conferences. Monitoring of the implementation of student-involved conferences over a five year period affirms that student-involved conferences support student learning and strengthen parents-school relationships because the more informed parents are, the more confident they are that their child's learning needs are being met. Rather than being just another educational bandwagon, student-involved conferences are laying tracks in a new direction that puts student learning at the center of the educational agenda.

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### Figure 5 – preparing for conferences

#### Conference preparations – student

- Identify strengths, learning needs/ challenges and goals for upcoming term.
- Select evidence of learning such as: text for oral reading, activities and/or work to demonstrate or show learning.
- Role-play conference with peer or older buddy.
- Take materials home for parents.
- Come with parents to conference.

#### Conference preparations – teacher

- Communicate regularly about children's learning.
- Identify strengths, learning needs/ challenges and goals for upcoming term for each child.
- Assist students to select evidence of learning such as: text for oral reading, activities and/or work to demonstrate or show learning.
- Help prepare parents by sending a letter home describing the upcoming conference and including preparation forms.
- Arrange conference times and offer to meet with any parent that also wishes to have a parent-teacher conversation.
- Relax and enjoy celebrating your students' accomplishments.

#### Conference preparations – parents

- Identify strengths, learning needs/ challenges and goals for upcoming term.
- Review selected evidence of learning and give compliments.
- Consider wishes for improvement.
- Prepare personal notes for conference.
- Select conference time.