



How to Run Successful Parent-Team Conferences

Tips by the Dozen for Middle-Level Educators

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by Howard M. Miller

While there is much evidence of the value of increased parental involvement in schools (Holland 1997, National PTA 1997), the relationships among middle school parents, teachers, and students too often resemble those of a dysfunctional family. Early adolescents are notorious for failing to communicate with their parents about what they are doing in school. They also have been known to play teacher against parent and parent against teacher as they engage in selective recall and "spin" about their missing assignments or questionable behavior.

Only by forming an alliance can parents and teachers effectively work together to help students negotiate the treacherous path through the middle school years. One potent tool for creating parent-teacher bonds at the middle level is the parent-team conference. In middle schools that hold conferences this way, parents no longer have to wander from room to room, waiting in the halls to meet with individual teachers, repeating their questions and concerns over and over, and trying to put together a picture of their child's progress by looking at various fragmented (and sometimes contradictory) pieces of the puzzle. Instead, the entire process is far more relaxed and efficient, with multiple teachers giving parents a full picture of their child's functioning in school.

At Thomas Jefferson Middle School in Jefferson City, Missouri, where I formerly taught, we experimented with parent-team conferences and learned a number of ways to make them successful. The following 12 tips are culled from those experiences:

1. *Be in touch long before the conference.* Plan parent-team conferences in the context of a larger plan for involving parents. The meeting should not be teachers' first contact with parents. They should have been communicating all along, making team phone calls during the opening days of school, using the homework hotline or teacher voice mail, and sending home newsletters, assignments, and other important information.
2. *Be direct and personal in arranging the conference.* At Jefferson, team teachers were responsible for personally contacting parents of the students in their homerooms to set conference dates and times. We called parents during our team planning time.
3. *Be accommodating—and try not to take "no" for an answer.* We had two formal times for parent-team conferences during the year, and for each conference, we set aside an evening and a morning to accommodate parents' schedules. We asked parents when they would prefer to come, and set appointments using a master schedule. For those parents who said they couldn't come at any of the set times, we offered to meet before school, after school, or during our team planning time.
4. *Be on time.* Allow 10 minutes per conference, with an additional five minutes between meetings to provide some flexibility. Try to stick to the schedule.
5. *Be prepared with handouts and work samples.* You've only got 10 minutes. What is it that you want the parents to know? We had handouts, copies of assignments, grading criteria, information about our homework hotline, and other general materials ready to give out, as well as gradebooks and student work