

PARENT PREFERENCE
IN PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES

by

Carol R. Krejci

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Dr. Howard Parkhurst
Investigation Advisor

The Graduate School
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The Graduate School
University of Wisconsin-Stout
Menomonie, WI 54751

ABSTRACT

Krejci, Carol R.

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The purpose of this study is to determine seventh grade parent preference in parent-teacher conference formats at a small, Midwestern middle school. The study included all parents of seventh grade students who attended parent-teacher conferences in the fall of 2001. Data was collected using a survey, which included nine items.

The information will be used to identify parent preference on specific components of the parent-teacher conference. Results of this study will help to improve conferences at this middle school.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

With the emphasis on learning outcomes, assessment, and standards in education in Wisconsin, teachers must examine all facets of the educational process to determine ways to enhance and improve student learning. One area that is often ignored as a method of learning is the degree of involvement by the parent. Schools must assess and evaluate the effectiveness of current contacts with parents and evaluate whether parents feel these contacts are of value or simply a formality.

One avenue for direct parent-teacher contact is the parent-teacher conference. Other than report cards, parent-teacher conferences are one of the main tools schools use to communicate student progress to the parent. If teachers can gain the full support of the parent, this can be a powerful motivating factor for the student in helping him or her to succeed.

In assessing the curriculum and numerous other programs at a small middle school in the Midwest, the advisor/advisee program came under scrutiny. One of the components of the advisor program was the communication component in the affective domain. Because of this scrutiny, the staff began to take an in-depth look at the effectiveness of the current methods of reporting student progress to the parents of their advisees.

One concern among teachers at this middle school was the non-attendance of some parents at and the seeming ineffectiveness of parent-teacher conference nights. Past administrators tried to improve attendance on these evenings by asking parents to come in to pick up report cards instead of mailing them or sending them with the student. This increased the attendance, but some parents still did not voluntarily visit any of their child's teachers.

The conferences were then moved from the classrooms to the gymnasium for an “arena style” conference setting. In the arena style, all teachers are located in a large room, like a gymnasium or a cafeteria, at a table with two chairs. Grade level teachers are seated near each other, and parents stand in line to visit the teachers they would like to see.

A disadvantage to this style of conference was that parents seemed to have to stand in line quite a long time for some teachers. Teachers were also feeling pressured to hurry up, and this did not allow for ample discussion time of a student’s progress. Consequently, the general feeling among teachers was that these conferences were ineffective and in need of improvement.

The staff felt the communication between school and parent could be improved if the most important factor was included in the conference – the student. Who best to identify strengths and areas in need of improvement?

In surveying other middle schools and their conference formats, it was determined that several schools used the student-led conference format. A review of the literature indicates that the student-led conference lends itself to improved communication and cooperation between parent, teacher, and student. The student, with the help of his/her advisor, plans, leads, and evaluates the conference. Schools have indicated that parents who generally will not volunteer for activities will usually come with their child, especially if they know the child has been preparing for this conference.

Currently, there are two different formats being used at Bloomer Middle School – the arena style and the student-led conference. There are various teacher reasons for these different formats, but in order to improve and increase parent involvement in the conference, parent input into the effectiveness and format preference is necessary.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to determine seventh grade parent preference in parent-teacher conference formats at this small Midwestern middle school. A survey will be used to assess parent preferences.

Research Hypothesis

The research hypothesis for this study is parents will prefer scheduled student-led conferences over the unscheduled teacher-led walk-in arena style conference format.

Null Hypothesis

The null hypothesis for this study is parents will prefer the teacher-led walk-in arena style conference over the scheduled student-led conference format.

Goals

This study will focus on the following goals:

1. To determine if parents prefer conferences to be scheduled with advisors or subject area teachers and led by the students.
2. To determine where parents prefer conferences to be held.
3. To determine if parents prefer to receive report cards before or during conferences.
4. To determine if parents believe conferences are a useful tool in helping students to improve grades.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Related Literature

Introduction

With the increased pressures on students to measure up to state standards and perform better on state-mandated tests, educators must examine school programs and activities to identify all possible avenues of student learning. One area that is an extremely important and often forgotten tool in student learning is parent involvement. In today's society it is essential that schools and parents work together to meet the needs of students. "When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life" (Henderson & Berla, 1995, p.1). In the review of related literature, parent involvement in schools will be examined. The major focus of this review will be in the area of parent-teacher conferences, focusing on goals and the advantages and disadvantages for parents, teachers, and students at the middle school level.

Parent Involvement at the Middle Level

At the middle level, active parent involvement seems to decline. Adolescents at this level are caught between childhood and adulthood. Some days the student wants to be treated as a child with lots of support and direction and the next day treated as an adult with the "leave me alone, I can do it myself" attitude. As the adolescent moves toward adulthood, the relationship between parent and child begins to change. At this level some children do not want their parents as actively involved in school activities and programs as their parents may have been in the elementary school, while others still do. Besides student views, there are other roadblocks to parent involvement at the middle level, which vary from the administration not wanting certain parents involved to the

teacher who does not have time to communicate needed information to the parent (Berger, 2000).

“Supportive, empowered parents make a teacher’s work easier, not harder. When parents view the school’s climate as “inviting,” they become good public relations advocates for that school” (Botrie & Wenger, 1992, p. 9). Educators and administrators must realize in today’s society that parents and teachers are more in need of each other’s support than ever before. Teachers and schools are experiencing a lessening of community support and increasingly difficult working conditions brought on by reduction in school budgets (Swap, 1987). Not only is parent involvement needed for students to maximize their learning, but schools also need parents to help improve the school’s image in the eyes of the community.

Swap (1987) stated, “There are three good reasons to involve parents:

1. Parent involvement benefits children.
2. Where parents and teachers work successfully together, teachers report experiencing support and appreciation from parents and a rekindling of their enthusiasm for problem solving.
3. Schools benefit from access to resources that parents bring”
(pp. 2-3).

In looking at these goals, middle level educators must utilize all resources that the parents can bring and overcome their own fears when it comes to parent involvement.

Parent involvement can occur in a variety of ways both actively and passively. Some of the more frequent parent-school contacts are in the form of telephone calls, attendance at school functions such as concerts and athletic events, open houses, and parent-teacher conferences (Berger, 2000). Botrie and Wenger (1992) stated, “If parents are invited to school early in the year so that programs can be explained as simply and concretely as possible, they will develop a more realistic view of the school and its goals”

(p. 9). It is important to set the year off on a positive note to develop a good rapport between parents and teachers. Parents need to become positive cooperating partners with their child's teacher, so they can work together to maximize the child's learning.

In examining the extent of parent involvement at the middle level, the research showed that the activity that currently involved the most parents was the parent-teacher conference. There are several different formats for parent-teacher conferences at the middle level: the traditional conference, the arena-style conference, the three-way conference, and the student-led conference.

The traditional parent-teacher conference generally has these goals: to give information, to get information and to find solutions to academic or behavioral problems (Rabbitt, 1978). More specifically, these conferences usually share report card information and provide parents an opportunity to be involved. Traditional conferences frequently exclude the student, who is a vital link in effective home-school communications (Hackmann, Kenworthy, & Nibbelink, 1995, p. 2). Traditional conferences are usually held twice during the year, once at the end of the first quarter and then again at the end of the third quarter. These times may vary within school districts. The traditional conference is typically a scheduled conference. This time period allows about fifteen to twenty minutes for the parents and the teacher to discuss the child's progress. At this conference the teacher may go over student grades and discuss behavioral issues.

Scheduling is an advantage to this style of conference. The parents typically choose the best time for them, and the teacher schedules the conference accordingly. This style is also an effective tool for providing feedback to parents (Hackmann, Kenworthy, & Nibbelink, 1995).

A disadvantage with this style of conference format is it usually is dominated by the teacher and does not allow enough time for parent questions. Another disadvantage

is that students are excluded from these conferences and become wary of what is being said about them behind closed doors (Clark, 1999, p.1). A problem that may occur is the parent may hear one view from his or her child and another view from the teacher. It puts the parent in an awkward situation of either believing his or her child or the teachers. This generally places both the parents and the teachers on the defensive, blocking open communication and better understanding (LeCountryman & Schroeder, 1996). Teachers may even experience stress if they fear a possible negative confrontation with a parent (Hackmann, Kenworthy, & Nibbelink, 1995,) which is also another disadvantage.

Another conference format used primarily at the middle and high school level is the arena-style conference. In this type of conference format, teachers are seated in the gymnasium at tables with two chairs. Parents may come at any time during the allotted conference hours and wait in line to speak to the teachers they wish to see. Principals have tried to improve attendance at this type of conference by holding report cards and having parents pick them up at the entrance before visiting with the teachers (Swiderek, 1997).

For the parents there are several disadvantages of this format. One is that they have not seen the report cards prior to arriving, so parents are coming in unprepared and do not have time to discuss the grade(s) with their child. Another disadvantage is that the parents must stand in line to speak to each teacher, as conferences are not scheduled. Some parents become frustrated and leave because they do not have time to wait in line. Others feel that confidentiality is compromised because not only is the next teacher about three feet away, but the next parent is standing about five feet behind them.

There are positive components to this style in that if the parents choose to take the time, they are able to see all of their child's teachers, but it might take several hours.

Another positive to this format is that the parents can choose the most convenient time for them and with which teachers they would like to consult.

Another style of conference format is the three-way conference or triad conference. The purpose of this conference is to share student learning and to have all three stakeholders (student, parent, and teacher) generate a report card or growth plan for the student (Grant, Heffler, & Mereweather, 1995, p. 27). Similar to the traditional conference, the teacher retains control over the conference, but the student is present to explain or clarify when necessary. The student, parent, and teacher discuss and identify strengths and areas for growth. This leads to improved cooperation between home and school.

A disadvantage to the three-way conference is the teacher or advisor, who represents all the student's teachers, may sometimes be in the dark, interpreting assessments for classes he or she did not teach (LeCountryman & Schroeder, 1996). Another problem that may occur is that the parents may feel that the classroom teacher still dominates the conference too much when the three parties are supposedly equal partners in the child's education (Lam & Peake, 1997).

The student-led conference format, as the name implies, is led by the student. The student must plan, implement, conduct, and evaluate the parent conference (Grant, Heffler, & Mereweather, 1995). At this conference, students and parents are scheduled a time to meet with their advisor. Prior to the conference, with the assistance of the advisor, students compile a materials packet of information they wish to share with their parents. The student understands that he or she is accountable for the grades and must be prepared to explain the reasons for any unacceptable grades (Hackmann, Kenworthy, & Nibbelink, 1995). Making the student accountable to the parents encourages students to strive for their academic best. The student also practices introducing his/her parents to the advisor and vice versa.

Goals of the student-led conference vary with the age of the student. Grant, Heffler, and Mereweather (1995) stated, “The main purpose of the student-led conference is to celebrate the student’s learning and give direction for improved learning” (p. 27). This general goal can be applied to all grade levels.

At the middle level, the student-led conference goals have been expanded and developed to meet the needs of the adolescent student, parent, and teacher. Hackmann, Kenworthy, and Nibbelink (1998) include these goals at the middle level:

1. To encourage students to accept personal responsibility for their academic performance.
2. To teach students the process of self-evaluation.
3. To facilitate the development of the students’ organization and oral communication skills and to increase their self-confidence.
4. To encourage students, parents, and teachers to engage in open and honest dialogue.
5. To increase parent attendance at conferences. (p. 35)

These goals can be tailored to meet the specific needs of each middle school.

This style of conference also has disadvantages. Some parents still prefer to talk to the teacher without their child present. There may be issues, either behavioral or educational, which the parents would like to discuss privately with the teacher. Some parents may view this format as discouraging them from discussing problems their child may have with a teacher because they don’t want to discuss these kinds of problems in front of their child (LeCountryman & Schroeder, 1996). In addition, it could be harmful to have the child present if the parents are overly supportive of the child, or if the child is overly defensive (Potter & Bulach, 2001). Another disadvantage is initial preparation time, which may take away from course content instructional time. Teachers must initially prepare and teach students how to lead this style conference. This is

accomplished through lessons and role-playing by assuming the different roles of the student, teacher, and parent (Hackmann, Kenworthy, & Nibbelink, 1998). However, once a student has led a conference and knows what to expect, the time spent on planning the next conference declines.

There are several advantages to this conference. Students now know what is said about them. There no longer is that feeling of people saying things behind their backs (Hackmann, Kenworthy, & Nibbelink, 1998). Potter and Bulach (2001) state, "A student's presence provides an opportunity to show the student that the teacher and parents are united in their positive expectations. This could result in improved behavior and academic performance on the part of the student" (pp. 37-40). Another benefit is that the student is held accountable for his/her grades and needs to develop an improvement plan before the conference occurs. With the student taking ownership of the learning and the improvement plan, many students made great strides in improving their academic performance. Students feel far more accountable for their behavior and their academic work when they have to explain their performance to parents and teachers (Denby, 1996). The parent, child, and teacher now work cooperatively together for improvement of student learning. Teachers cite as benefits: a more positive and relaxed conferencing atmosphere, lessened teacher stress, and a reduced faculty workload in preparation for the conferences (Hackmann, Kenworthy, & Nibbelink, 1998). Many parents view the conference process as one that focuses on the whole child, fosters more student-learning responsibility, and accentuates the positive attributes about their child's learning (Ricci, 2000).

Whatever style conference format is chosen, teachers and administrators must remember that "communication is always the key to a positive home-school rapport" (Swiderek, 1997, p. 580). In attempting to promote parent involvement, there are two basic goals: increasing the quality of the contacts between

parents and educators and increasing the quantity of parents who interact with the school (Swap, 1987). In determining student success, the greatest and possibly strongest single factor in this success is greater positive parental involvement (Botrie and Wenger, 1992).

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will describe the subjects under study, and how they were selected for inclusion in this study. In addition, the instrument being used to collect information will be discussed as to its content, validity, and reliability. Data collection and analysis procedures will then be presented. The chapter will conclude with some of the methodological limitations.

Description of Subjects

The subjects for this study are the parents of seventh grade students enrolled at a small, Midwestern middle school during the fall semester of 2001. There are currently 68 students enrolled in this seventh grade class. The school is located in a small, rural, farming community in the Midwest.

These subjects were selected because they experienced the “arena style” conference last year as sixth grade parents, and this year they experienced, for the first time, the student-led conference.

Instrumentation

The survey was developed by the researcher based on the goals of this study. The survey contained nine yes/no questions, and the total instrument was one page in length. Nominal data was collected for this survey. The questions were based on the researcher’s comparison of the two formats for parent-teacher conferences currently being used at the middle school.

To support the validity of this survey, a pilot test was conducted using five parents of other middle school-aged children not attending this particular middle school.

Based on their responses, minor revisions were made to the survey prior to conferences. The survey appeared to have face validity based on comments by the pilot test group. A copy of the finalized survey is located in Appendix A (see page 34).

Data Procedures

The survey was administered during the regular fall conferences scheduled at the middle school. Permission was obtained by the district administrator and building principal to conduct the survey during the conferences. A “Protection of Human Subjects in Research” form was on file with the Graduate College at the University of Wisconsin-Stout prior to the collection of data.

Seventh grade teachers gave the introductory letter, consent form statement, and survey to each parent after completion of the student-led conference. Parents were able to complete the survey prior to leaving the gymnasium, or were able take it home for completion. A collection box was located at the entrance of the gymnasium for completed surveys. If the surveys were completed at home, they could be returned to the researcher by mail or by sending them with their children during the following week.

Data Analysis

This study is a descriptive study on parent preference of two parent-teacher conference formats. There is only one variable under investigation, therefore the objectives will be addressed with nominal data showing frequencies and percentages. After the deadline for the survey return, they were examined for data analysis by the researcher and the University of Wisconsin – Stout Computer User Support Service.

Delimitations of the Study

Possible delimitations of this study may include:

1. The parent completing the survey may have been influenced by the spouse or child when completing the survey.
2. The parent may not have had sufficient time to complete the survey at the conference.
3. Students may not have returned the survey to the researcher by the due date if the survey was completed at home.
4. No follow up surveys were sent out, so the sample size was limited to those who responded within the specified time frame.
5. Potential respondents who failed to complete the survey may represent a certain percent of the population, with opinions which differ from the group who returned the surveys. Those respondents who did not respond may have felt that their opinions did not matter or felt that their answers were different than those expected, thereby affecting the results of the study.
6. Some parents may not have attended because they felt the format made the conferences of little help.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Introduction

This chapter will present the results of the parent preference survey. The demographic information and descriptive statistics will be reported first. Data collected on each of the research questions will then be given.

Demographic Information

Total enrollment of the seventh grade class at this middle school at the time the survey was administered was sixty-eight (n=68). Fifty-nine (87%) parents attended the student-led conferences, and the survey was given to these parents. Thirty-six parents (61%) participated in the study by returning the surveys to the researcher. The researcher provided a drop box at the entrance of the gymnasium on conference nights and collected surveys after school each day during the following week from the seventh grade students.

Data Collected

Research Question One

Thirty-six out of the thirty-six respondents (100%) answered the question; “Do you prefer scheduled conferences?” Of the thirty-six respondents, thirty-five (97.2%) answered yes, and one (2.8%) responded no.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
yes	35	97.2	97.2	97.2
no	1	2.8	2.8	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	

Research Question Two

The second survey question was a two-part question to be answered by parents who responded “yes” to the first question (Table 2). One hundred percent (100%) of the sample responded to the first part of the question, “Should conferences be scheduled with your child’s advisor?” Twenty-five out of thirty-five (71.4%) answered yes, and four (11.4%) responded no. Six surveys were assumed no (17.1%) due to a yes response to the second part of the question. The second part of the question (Table 3), “Should conferences be scheduled with your child’s core teachers?” was answered by twenty-seven (77.1%) of the thirty-five people. Thirteen (37.1%) responded yes, and fourteen (40%) responded no. The researcher assumed eight other no responses (22.9%) due to their response of the first part of the question.

Table 2: If Yes #1, should conferences be with the advisor?				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	25	69.4	71.4	71.4
No	4	11.1	11.4	82.9
No (assumed)	6	16.7	17.1	100.0
Missing	1	2.8		
Total	36	100.0		

Table 3: If Yes #1, should conferences be scheduled with your child's core teacher?				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	13	36.1	37.1	37.1
No	14	38.9	40.0	77.1
No (assumed)	8	22.2	22.9	100.0
Missing	1	2.8		
Total	36	100.0		

Research Question Three

Thirty-three out of thirty-six (91.7%) answered the question, "Do you believe students should be present at conferences?" Twenty-nine (80.6%) replied yes, and four (11.1%) replied no. Two surveys contained both yes and no (5.6%) responses while one parent responded maybe/don't know (2.8%).

Table 4: Do you believe students should be present at conferences?
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	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	29	80.6	80.6	80.6
No	4	11.1	11.1	91.7
Both yes and no	2	5.6	5.6	97.2
Maybe/don't know	1	2.8	2.8	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	

Research Question Four

This question was a two-part question to be answered by people who answered “yes” to question three. The first part of question four asked whether students should lead the conference. Out of the twenty-nine people who responded to question three, twenty-seven (84.4%) responded yes, and two (6.3%) responded no. No was the assumed response in three surveys (9.4%). Four surveys (11.1%) did not respond to this question.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	27	75.0	84.4	84.4
No	2	5.6	6.3	90.6
No (assumed)	3	8.3	9.4	100.0
Total	32	88.9	100.0	
Missing	4	11.1		
Total	36	100.		

Part two of question four asked if the teacher should lead the conference. Seven out of thirty-two (21.9%) responded yes, and fifteen (46.9%) responded no. The

researcher assumed nine no responses (28.1%), and one (3.1%) responded maybe/don't know to this question. Four (11.1%) surveys did not answer this question so are considered missing.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	7	19.4	21.9	21.9
No	15	41.7	46.9	68.8
No (assumed)	9	25	28.1	96.9
Maybe / don't know	1	2.8	3.1	100.0
Total	32	88.9	100.0	
Missing	4	11.1		
Total	36	100.0		

Table seven is a cumulative summary of who parents prefer to lead the conference. Three surveys (9.4%) preferred both the student and teacher to lead the conference. Fourteen (43.8%) preferred student only. The researcher assumed nine (28.1%) more student only choices. One (3.1%) responded student/maybe teacher, while one (3.1%) responded teacher only. One (3.1%) responded neither student nor teacher, while three (9.4% assumed) responded teacher only. Again, four surveys (11.1%) did not respond so are considered missing.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Both student/ teacher	3	8.3	9.4	9.4

teacher				
Student only	14	38.9	43.8	53.1
Student only (assumed)	9	25	28.1	81.3
Student/ maybe teacher	1	2.8	3.1	84.4
Teacher only	1	2.8	3.1	87.5
Neither student or teacher	1	2.8	3.1	90.6
Teacher only (assumed)	3	8.3	9.4	100.0
Total	32	88.9	100.0	
Missing	4	11.1		
Total	36	100.0		

Research Question Five

Question five dealt with the location of conferences, "Should conferences be held in the gymnasium?" Thirty-five out of thirty-six (97.2%) responded to this question. Twenty-six (72.2%) people responded yes, and nine (25.0%) responded no to this question. One (2.8%) is an assumed no answer.

Table 8: Should conferences be held in gymnasium?				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	26	72.2	72.2	72.2
No	9	25	25	97.2
No (assumed)	1	2.8	2.8	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	

Research Question Six

Question six also dealt with location, “Should conferences be held in classrooms?” Of the thirty-six respondents, thirty-three (91.7%) answered this question. Thirteen (36.1%) parents responded yes, and twenty (55.6%) parents responded no. Two (5.6%) surveys are assumed no, and one (2.8%) responded maybe/don’t know.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	13	36.1	36.1	36.1
No	20	55.6	55.6	91.7
No (assumed)	2	5.6	5.6	97.2
Maybe/ don’t know	1	2.8	2.8	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	

Research Question Seven

Question seven was a three-part question asking when parents would prefer to receive their child’s report card. One hundred percent of the sample responded to this question. Thirteen (36.1%) preferred the report cards before conferences; twenty-two (61.1%) preferred them during conferences; and one (2.8%) preferred report cards after the conferences. Table 10 is a cumulative table summarizing this three-part question.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
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Before/during	2	5.6	5.6	5.6
Before	4	11.1	11.1	16.7
Before (assumed)	7	19.4	19.4	36.1
During	6	16.7	16.7	52.8
During (assumed)	16	44.4	44.4	97.2
After (assumed)	1	2.8	2.8	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	

Research Question Eight

Question eight asked, “ Do you believe your child will try to improve grades because of these conferences?” Thirty-five out of thirty-six responded to the question. Thirty-five (97.2%) of the parents responding answered yes. One (2.8%) parent responded maybe/don’t know.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	35	97.2	97.2	97.2
Maybe/don’t know	1	2.8	2.8	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	

Research Question Nine

Question nine read, “Do you believe conferences are useful in improving student learning?” One hundred percent of the thirty-six respondents answered the question.

Thirty-five (97.2%) answered yes, and one (2.8%) responded no.

Table 12: Do you believe conferences are useful in improving student learning?				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	35	97.2	97.2	97.2
No	1	2.8	2.8	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	

Comments

The survey contained space for written comments. Three parents chose to write comments.

One parent wrote, “I like the scheduled conference (it doesn’t take forever). It would be kind of nice to be able to talk to a few of the other teachers if need be – but that’s kind of difficult. I wish it was more convenient to communicate with the teachers that your child is having problems with, but I don’t know how that would be set up.”

“It is nice to know and understand how the child is doing in class as well as with other people,” another parent wrote.

A third parent commented, “I feel the teachers and parents could talk more freely if the student was not present at the conference.”

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter will include a discussion of the results of the study and conclusions. The chapter will conclude with some recommendations for further research.

Discussion

The two formats currently being used at this middle school are the walk-in arena style conference and the student-led scheduled conference. The seventh grade parents were chosen to participate in this study because they have experienced both formats – the walk-in arena style last year, when their children were sixth graders, and the scheduled student-led conference this year.

The seventh grade class has an enrollment of sixty-eight students. Of the sixty-eight students, fifty-nine were represented by an adult at the conference (87%) with thirty-six (61%) adults responding to the survey. The rate of return for the survey was comparatively low when compared with attendance at the conference. The researcher feels the most likely reason for not responding to the survey may simply be that the parents did not want to be bothered with completing and returning the survey after the conferences. When families returned home, parents may have been too busy or too tired to complete the survey. With all of the demands on a parent's time, both at home and at work, the survey could easily have been forgotten amidst other demands. Another possible explanation for the low rate of return may be the issue of the student-led conference. People who did not respond to the survey may not have liked this style of conference, and assumed that the researcher was expecting parents to prefer this format, so they chose not to complete the survey.

The researcher has observed, however, that school-wide the student-led conferences were better attended than the walk-in arena style. The arena style conference had an attendance rate of 65%, whereas the student-led conference had an

attendance rate of 87% in the seventh grade and 89% in the eighth grade. An observation made by the researcher for the high rate of attendance at the student-led conference is parents may have been pressured by their son or daughter to attend. The advisor and the student have spent a great deal of time and energy preparing for this conference. Students seemed to be looking forward to this opportunity to introduce their parents to the advisor as well as to celebrate their accomplishments and to explain their improvement plans. This was the second year of the student-led conference format for the parents of the eighth grade students, and the attendance rate (89%) was even higher. The researcher has assumed that the first experience with this style of conference was successful, and therefore more parents attended the second year because of the positive experience of the first year.

The first question of the survey addressed the issue of whether parents preferred to have scheduled conferences. As might be expected, a majority of parents responding to this survey preferred to have a scheduled parent conference. This response was expected due to the amount of time that the parent must wait to speak to a teacher in the walk-in style conference. Most parents are quite busy and do not have the freedom to wait to speak with each teacher as is needed in this type of conference.

The second question was to be answered by parents who responded yes to preferring scheduled conferences. This question asked with whom the conference should be scheduled – the student's advisor or one of the student's core teachers. Of the parents preferring scheduled conferences, most preferred to schedule the conference with the child's advisor instead of with one of the child's core teachers. This result was a little surprising to the researcher since the researcher personally feels that meeting with a core teacher would be more informational than with the child's advisor. The most likely explanation for this result may be that the parents completing this survey had a positive experience with the scheduled conference with the child's advisor. The

seventh grade parents have not experienced a scheduled conference with a “core” teacher, so they were unable to give an objective response to this question. The parent may also believe that the child’s advisor would have received more information from each of the core teachers, and would then be able to give a clearer and unbiased picture of the academic and behavioral performance of the child. Parents may feel the core teacher may only be knowledgeable about the child’s performance in his or her subject area and not be familiar with the overall picture. Another explanation may be that parents may not fully understand the role of the advisor and think the advisor knows more than he/she really does. Parents probably have kind of a warm fuzzy feeling about the term “advisor” and assume that the advisor may have solutions for problem areas that a core teacher may not have. A third possible explanation is that some parents may not have understood the term “core” teacher and didn’t realize the exchange of communication that takes place prior to the conference between the students’ various teachers.

Question three asked if parents preferred their child to be present at the conference. Eighty percent (80%) of the parents surveyed preferred students to be present. The researcher was expecting more parents to respond negatively to this question. When talking informally with parents and friends about their children being present at parent conferences, many had expressed a concern about discussing grades, behavior, and other sensitive issues in the presence of their children. The most likely reason for this response may be that other parents feel it is better to discuss these issues together openly to reduce any questions about what is being said about the child. The child then knows exactly what is being said, so there is no guessing or suspicion harbored by the child about the conference. Another possible explanation is the probability that parents feel they are supposed to respond this way, since this is a new “progressive” method and the “in” way to conduct a conference. This may be the feeling

of the parents who did not respond to the survey. They may have felt that even if they responded, their views might have been ignored, and therefore decided not to waste the time and energy to complete the survey.

Of the parents preferring students to be present, most preferred the students to lead the conference. Only 22% preferred the teacher to lead the conference. The review of other research (see Chapter 2) suggested this result, but the researcher expected more parents to prefer the teacher to lead the conference. The most likely explanation for this preference may be a result of parents feeling their child has reached an age where he or she can explain the expectations and goals of each academic area. Many middle level students are mature enough to be taking ownership of their work and are capable of assessing and recognizing areas needing improvement and identifying other areas in which they excel. Another possible explanation is that the conference may be a better-balanced conference. First, the teacher is not dominating the conference with his/her agenda. Teachers sometimes unintentionally focus more on negative issues rather than the positive because of the time constraints at a conference. Teachers want to inform parents of areas of concern and often run out of time at a conference. Consequently, not enough positive comments may be communicated to the parent about his or her child. After several years of hearing negative comments and not enough positives, parents don't want or care to come to school to hear the same negative things about their child. With the student-led conference, a better balance may be occurring between the positive and negative qualities of the student. More attention may be given to the positive qualities and less to the negative side with the student leading the conference. It seems natural that students don't care to talk about what they can't do, but would rather discuss and focus on what they can do. This response may also be an instance where the parents felt that this answer was an expected one because this is a "new" way to conduct a parent conference. Another possibility is that parents who did not

prefer the student-led conferences did not attend, so they did not receive a survey to complete.

Most parents preferred the conferences to be held in the gymnasium rather than individual classrooms. This result was also not expected because of the issue of confidentiality. In the larger area, specifically the gymnasium, people standing nearby can hear what is being said at each conference table, so confidentiality may be compromised. The researcher felt that more parents would prefer an area that would be more private and not as public as the gymnasium in which to hold a parent conference. However, confidentiality may not be the concern here; rather the concern may be the accessibility of teachers. Based on researcher observations, a possible and most likely explanation for this preference may be that all teachers are present in this large room. If a parent wants to speak to another teacher, he/she can easily see if the teacher is available or busy with another parent. The parent does not have to search for the teacher's classroom and then stand in line waiting to speak to that teacher. The large room allows the parent to quickly assess lines and length of waiting time to speak to other teachers. Parents can then make the decision of which teachers they really need to see. In addition, in the large room, teachers are less likely to leave their tables for any length of time as they might leave their classrooms. Teachers, too, can now see which parents are there and will wait for the parents to come to their table. Teachers may even make a specific request to visit with certain parents when their scheduled conference is completed. Another reason for preferring the gymnasium may be the easy accessibility of this room. In this school, it is much easier to find and is clearly marked, so parents don't have to wander around the school searching for the correct room. The gym may also be a neutral non-threatening room. The parent may feel more comfortable here rather than a particular classroom where there might be negative feelings of unpleasant situations from their own childhood.

Parents were also asked when they preferred to receive their child's report card. A majority of parents preferred to receive the report cards during conferences, whereas a notable number preferred report cards before the conference. The researcher expected more parents to prefer the report cards before conferences, so questions could be formulated to address specific areas of concern before the conference. Parents would also have the opportunity to discuss the grades with their child prior to the conference. A negative consequence of receiving the report card prior to the conference is that the parent will have heard only their child's explanation of the grades. By waiting to receive it at the conference, the parents are then able to discuss the grades objectively with the teacher and student. The most likely reason for receiving the report card at the conference may be that it gives the parents a reason for attending the conference, whereas they might not otherwise choose to attend.

The last two questions addressed the issue of whether the child would try to improve grades and student learning because of the parent conference. As expected, most parents believed that students would try to improve grades and student learning because of the conferences.

Conclusions

Although the sample size was small, the results concurred with most of the previous research conducted on parent-teacher conferences. This study indicated that most parents at this small Midwestern middle school preferred the scheduled student-led conference. If the student-led conference is chosen as the conference format for the school, teachers need to be sure to educate students on how to properly conduct a conference and make it a learning experience in which the student grows academically. The researcher feels that in order for this style of conference to be successful, the teacher and student must devote a quality block of time in preparation for this type of

conference. Teachers should also offer each parent the opportunity to meet individually without the student present in case there are sensitive issues to discuss with each other.

No matter the style or format of parent conference, it is extremely important for the teacher to be well-prepared for the conference. The teacher should be knowledgeable about all issues affecting his or her students and be able to communicate these effectively to the parents. Parents should be continually asked for suggestions for conference improvement, and teachers need to seriously consider any suggestions for improvement made by parents. Teachers need the positive support of the parent in order to help the student reach his or her full potential in the school setting.

Recommendations for further research

Several suggestions are offered for further research on parent preferences for parent-teacher conferences. These are:

1. Mail the survey to all seventh grade parents in order to obtain a sample that includes parents who chose not to attend the conferences.
2. Provide more tables and pencils for parents to use when completing the survey at the conferences.
3. Modify the instrument by eliminating the yes and no questions and giving the parents a choice between two answers. For example, Should conferences be held in the gym or the classroom?
4. Include in the survey eighth grade parents who have experienced the student-led conference for two years.

Beyond the boundaries of this survey, a study that would be worth exploring would be to assess the differential effects of the two types of conferences – the student-led and the traditional parent-teacher conference - on student achievement.

1. Survey students to see if there is a positive attitude change toward school achievement as a direct result of the student-led conference.

2. Survey students to determine if there is a positive correlation between achievement and student-led conferences.
3. Conduct a study of student achievement by tracking test scores and/or grades of students enrolled in districts where both styles of conferences are held.

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Appendix A

PLEASE COMPLETE THIS SURVEY BY CIRCLING YES OR NO TO EACH QUESTION.
Your answers and comments will be used to improve conferences at the middle school.

- | | | | |
|----|--|-----|----|
| 1. | Do you prefer scheduled conferences? | Yes | No |
| 2. | If you answered yes to number 1: | | |
| | a. Should conferences be scheduled with your child's advisor? | Yes | No |
| | b. Should conferences be scheduled with your child's core teachers? | Yes | No |
| 3. | Do you believe students should be present at conferences? | Yes | No |
| 4. | If you answered yes to number 3: | | |
| | a. Should the student lead the conference? | Yes | No |
| | b. Should the teacher lead the conference? | Yes | No |
| 5. | Should conferences be held in the gymnasium? | Yes | No |
| 6. | Should conferences be held in classrooms? | Yes | No |
| 7. | I would like to receive my child's report card: | | |
| | before the conference | Yes | No |
| | during the conference | Yes | No |
| | after the conference | Yes | No |
| 8. | Do you believe your child will try to improve grades because of these conferences? | Yes | No |
| 9. | Do you believe conferences are useful in improving student learning? | Yes | No |

Comments:

PLEASE PUT THIS SURVEY IN THE BOX ON THE TABLE BY THE DOOR ON YOUR WAY OUT.

(If you forget to drop the survey off or want to complete it at home, please send it to Mrs. Krejci either with your child or in the mail by the end of the week. Thanks.)

Appendix B

November 8, 2001

Dear Parents,

Thank you, in advance, for completing the parent survey. I will be compiling the data in determining parent preferences for parent-teacher conferences. This data will be used two ways. The first will be to utilize the data to improve conferences at the sixth grade level and the second will be in helping me to complete my thesis at UW-Stout.

On the back of this sheet is a consent form statement which is required to be given to all participants of any survey being conducted at the University. The pink sheet is the survey, which is to be completed by you and dropped in the box on the table by Mr. Kamrath. If you wish to complete the survey at home, please return it by Friday, November 16th to the Middle School office.

Thank you,

Carol Krejci
Sixth Grade

Appendix C

Consent Form

I understand that by returning this survey, I am giving my informed consent as a participating volunteer in this study. I understand the basic nature of the study and agree that any potential risks are exceedingly small. I also understand the potential benefits that might be realized from the successful completion of this survey. I am aware that the information is being sought in a specific manner so that no identifiers are needed and so that confidentiality is guaranteed. I realize that I have the right to refuse to participate and that decision will be respected with no coercion or prejudice.

Note: Questions or concerns about participation in the study and subsequent complaints should first be addressed to Mrs. Krejci at Bloomer Middle School (715) 568-1025 or Dr. Howard Parkhurst, research advisor, UW-Stout and second to Dr. Ted Knous, Chair UW-Stout Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, 11 HH, UW-Stout Menomonie, WI 54751, phone (715) 232-1126.