



Professional Practices

For the 21st Century Leader

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Making PSEL Come Alive!

About the Author



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As schools across the nation turn their eyes and calendars toward parent-teacher conferences, I wanted to take another look at this time-honored tradition by offering a few wonderings:

- I wonder why, if we're talking about student progress and goals at the parent-teacher conference, the student is typically absent from the conference?
- I wonder if Hattie's revised list of the most effective influences on student achievement identifies student self-reporting as the most significant indicator linked to raised student achievement, why we still hold a 15-minute meeting where the teacher tells parents how their children are doing behaviorally, socially, and academically?
- I wonder if reporting at conferences is about sharing information on student progress and achievement, how we can involve parents in real and meaningful ways?
- I wonder who is better at describing their learning successes and struggles, hopes and dreams, goals and aspirations than the most affected person in the equation - the student?

I use this issue of *Professional Practices for the 21st Century Leader*, which focuses on **Standard 8: Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community**, to convince you to consider moving your school, teachers, students, and parents to student-led conferences. I reviewed research on why and how to integrate this practice with our youngest of learners to our high school seniors. I share my learning and resources with you here, starting with a **Yesterday & Today of Parent-Teacher Conferences**. I hope you'll be convinced!

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Parent-Teacher Conferences

Yesterday

Students stay home on conference day.

Teacher prepares for the conference by planning presentation to parents.

Students may fear what will be discussed about them.

Teacher reflects on student learning and determines what is important to share with parents.

Conferences are planned for 10-15 minutes with a packed schedule, leaving little room for possible important and longer conversations.

One conference is held at a time.

Teacher controls the conference.

Teacher “tells” everything without input from student and little dialogue with parents.

Teacher typically sets goals for student.

Today

Students attend and participate in the conference.

Students prepare by selecting meaningful work to share with own parents.

Students are excited to share their learning with their parents.

Students reflect on and demonstrate their learning to their parents.

Conference is longer, lasting up to 45-60 minutes and meet/exceed the needs/expectations of all involved.

Several conferences are held at the same time.

Students lead and move through the conference as they deem appropriate using a portfolio, agenda, and possibly a script.

Teacher supports the student by being present and acts as a resource as needed.

Students set their own goals for improvement and identify ways parents and teachers can help them.

Student-Led Conferences: A Powerful Engagement Tool

Cherie Taylor-Patel put forth a usable definition of student-led conferences in her 2011 doctoral thesis *Student-Led Conferences: How effective are they as an alternative reporting method?* She notes simply, “A student-led conference is defined as a conference lasting between 30-60 minutes run by students, for their parents to learn about their learning. During the conference, students present work in different curriculum areas. Students discuss the process of learning and the progress they’ve made, with reference to their goals and the criteria against which their work has been evaluated.”

Parent-teacher conferences have long provided parents with updates on their child’s progress and opportunities to see their work. They also opened communication between school and home. However, students were, and are today largely passive or even absent during traditional parent-teacher conferences. One way to fix this is to put students in the lead, as they are the ones who are responsible for their work and progress and can best affect outcomes.

Many of my secondary principal colleagues seek ways to continue to engage parents in their child’s education, especially after middle school. I believe that parents, students, and teachers would place more emphasis on conferences, if they were indeed led by their son or daughter. In this era of immediate access to grades via online platforms, parents know where their child stands gradewise. What they might not know, however, are the academic goals set by their child or their unique reflection on their work and progress. What parents almost certainly do not know are any anecdotal remarks and feedback made by teachers and how their child responded.

In the student-led conference format, students and teachers prepare together, and then students lead the conference while teachers facilitate. They sit together with the parent to review and discuss the work and progress. The message is that the students are responsible for their own success. Student-led conference models vary, but the premise is the same: This is the student’s moment to share his or her reflections on achievements and challenges with his or her parents and seek assistance to meet their goals.

Adjusting to the new conference style can take time, but

parents become more reflective about their children’s progress and understand how to help at home. The students also gain a better understanding of their strengths and challenges and the correlation between their effort, progress, and resulting quality of work. For the student-led conference to be most successful, roles and expectations must be defined and communicated ahead of time.

I summarize below Martinez and McGrath’s recommendations for new roles and responsibilities in parent-teacher conferences as presented in *Deeper Learning: How Eight Innovative Public Schools Are Transforming Education in the Twenty- First Century*.

Student’s Role

From the beginning of the school year, students compile their portfolios consistently and thoughtfully. A portfolio for a student-led conference typically includes an agenda for the conference, a compilation of the student’s work in the class, and usually goal sheets outlining academic and behavioral standards for them moving forward, as well as information on how parents can help at home.

When assembling the portfolio, students maintain them throughout the year. Usually, students use self-evaluation checklists or learning surveys to determine their areas of strength and weakness and set learning goals. Check out the resources from **The Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning (WHEEL) School** in New York City. Students must resist the urge to show parents their very best work and provide them with a clear picture of their school year and progress including their best work and their “not-so-best” work. Most importantly, students clearly communicate their progress and learning processes with their parents.

As the conference date draws near, students rehearse while teachers model the process and give students time to practice in class prior to the conference. Students can rely on notebooks or notecards with their written reflections or talking points to help ease their nerves and remain on track during the conferences.

Additionally, students advocate for themselves during the conference. If they feel that their parents could do



more to help them, such as keeping younger siblings out of their rooms or study space during homework time, they can communicate this during the conference. Because student-led conferences are reflective by nature, students must be honest with themselves and their parents when reflecting on their grades, effort, and study habits. They also should set appropriate goals for the next grading period or semester.

Parent's Role

Parents accustomed to the traditional conferences will likely want to ask teachers about classroom behaviors and performance. Parents may find the most difficulty listening to their student instead of asking teachers for clarification or explanations. During student-led conferences, parents focus the conversation on their children and reflect on their work with them. They look at samples and listen to their children's explanations and reflections. Then, they ask how they can help and what the students need from them.

Some of the best questions that parents can ask center on homework environments and classroom efforts. This way they can participate in developing strategies to support their child and then remain consistent long after the conferences end.

Teacher's Role

During student-led conferences, teachers take on the role of facilitator, rather than that of leader. Individual teachers or whole schools may determine the conference format; for example, one teacher might meet with students and parents, or a few sets of families might

meet in one space with circulating teachers. Regardless of the format, teachers play a more direct role in conference preparation with the students than during actual conference time. For some useful tips, tools, and templates see the **National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)** PowerPoint presentation link on the next page.

When preparing students for conferences, teachers outline student portfolio requirements. Often, teachers ask students to choose pieces illustrating areas for improvement, strengths, and personal choice such as work samples that make them especially proud. Teachers also prepare students for presenting their work. Ultimately, the goal is to help students communicate their learning and processes to their parents through work samples.

Teachers also act as student advocates throughout the student-led conference. Parents may see lower than expected grades or hear surprising admissions from their child, so teachers need to guide discussions in a supportive manner that eliminates blame and promotes deeper connection.

Some schools that implement student-led conferences, also offer parents an additional time to meet for any questions or concerns that they would like discuss in the absence of their child. I believe this could undermine the power of the "student" in the student-led conference and would avoid this, unless there is something of an urgent or a very private nature.

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL)

- **Mission, Vision, and Core Values**
 - **Ethics and Professional Norms**
 - **Equity and Cultural Responsiveness**
 - **Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**
 - **Community of Care and Support for Students**
 - **Professional Capacity of School Personnel**
 - **Professional Community for Teachers and Staff**
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- **Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community**
Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
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- **Operations and Management**
 - **School Improvement**

Marcia's Top 5 Resources for Student-Led Conferences

- **The Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning (WHEEL) School** in New York City prepared this guidance document for implementing their student-led conferences. This complete resource offers an excellent explanation of the roles of each participant, student's self-evaluation template, scheduling templates, preparation checklists, sample student scripts, agendas, and even a sample academic support action planning tool. Check this one out and modify to fit your school needs.
<http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/74094537-E265-44BE-A841-EBE5C6139714/0/WHEELSStudentLedConferenceHandbook20082009.pdf>
- **The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)** posted a useful PowerPoint that you could adapt to meet your unique school needs to share with students, staff, and parents. It describes differences between traditional and student-led conferences, shares heart-felt quotes from teachers, parents, and students, organizing ideas, sample schedules, a nice sample of a personalized letter to parents from their son/daughter, a sample script, conference evaluation form, and much more.
<http://mlei.pbworks.com/f/SLCPP.pdf>
- **Oak Valley Middle School, Huron Valley Schools, Michigan**, has a website page dedicated to information on their student-led conferences. This page provides information about, and the research behind, the student-led conference model used at Oak Valley. It is a great resource that describes goals, benefits, communication strategies, skills assessment rubrics for both teacher and student.
http://www.hvs.org/downloads/ovmsfiles/studentled_20100713_100313_2.pdf
- **Student-Led Conferences in the Early Years**
Take a look at this clip and see a Pre-K student confidently share her emerging literacy and numeracy skills with her mom. They engage in conversation that increases connection and confidence. The activities and materials are chosen by the student.
<https://youtu.be/rXFfCzCFp9U>
- **Wildwood IB World Magnet School in Chicago** started with small steps to build student empowerment and ownership. The students describe where they were, where they are now, and what they want to do better and how their parent can help.
https://youtu.be/L_WBSInDc2E.

Self-Assessment
Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015 (PSEL)
Standard 8: Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community

Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.

1. Are approachable, accessible, and welcoming to families and members of the community.		My Priority
Degree to which I do this... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	Degree to which I want to know/do this better... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	
Goals, thoughts, and comments:		

2. Create and sustain positive, collaborative, and productive relationships with families and the community for the benefit of students.		My Priority
Degree to which I do this... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	Degree to which I want to know/do this better... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	
Goals, thoughts, and comments:		

3. Engage in regular and open two-way communication with families and the community about the school, students, needs, problems, and accomplishments.		My Priority
Degree to which I do this... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	Degree to which I want to know/do this better... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	
Goals, thoughts, and comments:		

4. Maintain a presence in the community to understand its strengths and needs, develop productive relationships, and engage its resources for the school.		My Priority
Degree to which I do this... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	Degree to which I want to know/do this better... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	
Goals, thoughts, and comments:		

5. Create means for the school community to partner with families to support student learning in and out of school.		My Priority
Degree to which I do this... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	Degree to which I want to know/do this better... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	
Goals, thoughts, and comments:		

Self-Assessment
Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015 (PSEL)
Standard 8: Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community

Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.

6. Understand, value, and employ the community’s cultural, social, intellectual, and political resources to promote student learning and school improvement.		My Priority
Degree to which I do this... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	Degree to which I want to know/do this better... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	
Goals, thoughts, and comments:		

7. Develop and provide the school as a resource for families and the community.		My Priority
Degree to which I do this... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	Degree to which I want to know/do this better... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	
Goals, thoughts, and comments:		

8. Advocate for the school and district, and for the importance of education and student needs and priorities to families and the community.		My Priority
Degree to which I do this... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	Degree to which I want to know/do this better... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	
Goals, thoughts, and comments:		

9. Build and sustain productive partnerships with public and private sectors to promote school improvement and student learning.		My Priority
Degree to which I do this... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	Degree to which I want to know/do this better... 1 (low)...2.....3.....4.....5 (high)	
Goals, thoughts, and comments:		

Download all Self-Assessments from *Professional Practices* at <http://bit.ly/2ygiG3V>

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) Update

In a recent *Phi Delta Kappan*, Joseph Murphy, Karen Seashore Louis, and Mark Smylie co-authored “Positive School Leadership: How the **Professional Standards for Educational Leaders** Can be Brought to Life.” These scholars from Vanderbilt, University of Minnesota, and University of Illinois remark, “However, as promising as **PSEL** may seem on paper, these standards will mean little unless and until people bring them to life in their professional practice.” The authors compel us to buy into the idea of **Positive School Leadership (PSL)** as a vehicle for bringing the **PSEL** to life. **PSL** flips the deficit model of school leadership focused on what needs correcting, supervising, and evaluating to the 6 big ideas below from Cameron, Dutton, and Quinn.

- A stronger professional calling
- A stronger moral framework
- A focus on character and virtue
- A focus on the interest of others
- Personalized relationships
- Empowerment and community building

Their take-away message is simple: “**PSEL** provides the profession with a powerful platform to understand the content and qualities of educational leadership work. **PSL** provides a superior scaffold for bringing the 2015 **PSEL** to life. Together, **PSEL** and **PSL** direct educational leadership toward high quality meaningful school for all.”

While researching for this issue of *Professional Practices*, I ran across a new Corwin publication by Joseph Murphy titled *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders: The Empirical, Moral, and Experiential Foundations* and immediately ordered a copy. Each chapter is written around one of the **PSEL** standards and includes its research base, moral foundations, and historical context. The book does not need to be read cover to cover. In fact, I read the Introduction and Chapter 10: “Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community” for this issue. The research is extensive and relevant. There are even 50 pages of references that supported the writing. You can read the Introduction and Chapter 3: “Equity and Cultural Responsiveness” at no cost at <https://us.corwin.com/en-us/nam/professional-standards-for-educational-leaders/book250300%20#preview>

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