

# Fostering Student Accountability Through Student-Led Conferences

by Patti Kinney

Foreword by Rick Stiggins

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# Introduction

When *A School-Wide Approach to Student-Led Conferences*, the foundation for this book, was published in 2000, student-led conferences were rare, especially at the middle-years and high school levels. Most schools used a traditional approach of parents and teachers meeting together to discuss student progress with nary a student in sight. And while the traditional approach is still common, more and more schools – of all year levels – have made the shift to student-led conferences as an authentic way of teaching students how to become self-reflective, self-evaluative learners and communicate that learning to others.

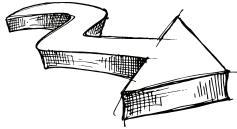
The process of students leading conferences was originally implemented at a time when regulations for state and national school accountability were hardly a blip on the horizon. Yet, even then we saw student-led conferences as much more than a communication system with parents; at its heart it was designed to hold students accountable for their learning. In 1999, assessment expert Rick Stiggins validated our belief when he said the student-led conference process

... is the biggest breakthrough in communicating about student achievement in the last century. When students are well prepared over an extended period to tell the story of their own success (or lack thereof), they seem to experience a fundamental shift in their internal sense of responsibility for that success. The pride in accomplishment that students feel

when they have a positive story to tell and tell it well can be immensely motivational. The sense of personal responsibility that they feel when anticipating what it will be like to face the music of having to tell their story of poor achievement can also drive them to productive work. (p. 196)

This book is not designed to be a recipe for student-led conferences, but rather a sharing of the ingredients that must be considered for them to be successful. Because there is no one-size-fits-all approach to their implementation, schools must look at their staff, their students and their community, and then decide how the conferences can effectively work within their situations. As the practice of student-led conferences has spread, it's been rewarding to hear stories of how schools have taken the ideas and made them their own. We hope you enjoy reading the story of one school as well as the stories of others who have taken a similar journey.

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## Chapter 1

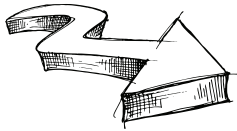
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# Setting the Stage

It's parent-teacher conference time, and there's a sense of urgency in the air. Hurried conversations occur across tables. While parents stand around impatiently glancing at their watches and waiting their turns, the sound of chimes breaks into the hum of voices. Conversations are quickly cut off as people shuffle from one place to another. Another round of conferences has begun. Teachers are available, sitting at tables packed together in the common area. Looking around the crowded room, one sees that some teachers will face a never-ending stream of parents, while others sit idly for long periods of time. And, despite the fact that conversations revolve around the progress of students, there's a curious lack of students present.

Sound familiar? If you attend conferences at most schools, you would observe a similar scene hour after hour, day after day. Instead, imagine the following scenario at your school.

Students and parents enter the school together and are welcomed at the front door. They arrive at the conference room, and after a brief introduction to the conference facilitator, the conference begins by students reading a letter written to their parent or guardian (see Figure 1-1).



## Chapter 3

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# Meanwhile ... Back in the Classroom

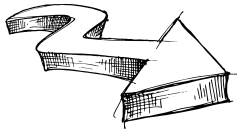
As you consider the change to student-led conferences, keep the goal of improving student learning at the forefront in all your decision making. In our case, once the initial organisation for SLCs was in place, we then focused on using it to enhance our school's level of instruction in terms of curriculum, instruction and assessment practices. Experience taught us that a student's demonstrating multiple skills and processes was more effective than showing a piece of work demonstrating a single skill; for example, a research project was more effective than a spelling test.

We found three things that classroom teachers can do to help students prepare for the SLCs are:

- Plan ahead to teach content standards in ways that demonstrate multiple skills and processes.
- Implement the curriculum in a timely manner, so work is completed and prepared for students to use during the conference.
- Teach students how to evaluate and reflect on their work to help them discover and demonstrate who they are as learners.

### **Plan early**

Making thoughtful decisions about curriculum, instruction and assessment early in the year will make the actual conferences much easier. Because



## Chapter 5

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# Putting the Pieces Together

Think of a SLC as a giant jigsaw puzzle. The teacher's job is to design the shape of the pieces, the student's task is to create them, and now it's the conference facilitator's turn to help students put the parts together to complete the big picture. For this to happen, the facilitator must schedule conferences, collect and organise students' work, ensure "Dear Parent" letters get written and goals get set, and above all – students need to practise, practise, practise!

Much of the organisational, logistics work done to implement SLCs at TMS happened through our office. The office manager made certain that the conference facilitators had the necessary materials and information needed to ensure a smooth implementation. In other schools, this has been done by the counselling or administration offices.

**Inform parents.** Prior to scheduling conferences, inform parents of the conference days and times. Mail a letter home, publish the information in the parent newsletter and on the school's website, send home a flyer with the dates and times, announce it in the daily announcements, or any combination of these.

**Scheduling sheet.** Create a scheduling sheet for each facilitator that shows times available for conferences and for drop-ins (if used) (see Figure 5-1). If preventing parents from having to make multiple trips to the school is a priority, schedule siblings first. An easy scheduling method is to compile a

list of families and call the oldest child of the family to the office, where the secretary schedules the conferences. After completing this process, the secretary gives the schedule sheets to the conference facilitator along with postcards (colour-coded for multiple languages if necessary) and mailing labels (see Figure 5-2).

**Facilitators schedule.** Approximately three weeks before the actual conferences, students meet with their facilitators to schedule the conferences. Facilitators ask each child for a time that will work for his/her parents or guardians and schedule accordingly. If students are absent or unsure of a time that will work for their parent(s) or guardian, facilitators can simply select a time. Because a message on the postcard informs parents to call the school if the selected time does not work, this method avoids lengthy delays and the problem of trying to find a convenient time. We found a good rule of thumb was to schedule these “tentative” conference appointments for an evening slot. The final step is to fill in the correct time, date and room on a postcard for each student; attach a mailing label; and return all postcards (along with the master schedules) to the office for mailing.

**Schedule breaks.** Facilitators were free to schedule themselves breaks during a conference time, but they were expected to be available in their rooms during the drop-in times. Because the student leads the conference, several conferences can occur simultaneously. We found it workable to schedule three conferences simultaneously during the day and, if necessary, four during the evening session.