



Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”
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Who are the True Beneficiaries of Student-Led Conferences?

“It takes a village to raise a child.” Although the origin of this phrase is rooted in an African proverb, it has become a battle cry for those that recognize the value of a varied and thorough upbringing. This premise is accented in education as the individual instructor has limits, but through the contributions of families, community members and other instructors the students’ educational process will be enhanced. One manifestation of this ownership in a child’s learning has materialized recently through the widespread use of student-led conferences and senior culminating projects.

A comprehensive education has always been the product of diverse contributors who serve in unique capacities to broaden and enhance the learning experience. Reflecting on one’s own personal journey provides opportunity for memories about the different roles that friends, relatives, teachers, and community members played in the process of maturation. Student-led conferences provide a venue for expression of this learning and serve as a culminating model of the role that the community will continue to play in students’ lives. The compelling evidence provided through student-voice serves to emphasize the forces that have helped shape the young man or woman as a productive and responsible citizen. By sharing academic progress and self-knowledge gained through various learning surveys and educational resources, students can demonstrate a newfound sense of personal awareness. They entered high school as freshmen confident they had the answers to the world’s problems but leave with a roadmap for future success and an understanding of the importance of the next several years in their journey. Nearly 93% of the students that completed their conference reflected on the process as being worthwhile and beneficial.¹ Their respective paths are extremely divergent in nature and reflect the unique qualities of each student. Yet, all students are prepared to embark upon the thirteenth year of their education. A young man in my advisory who benefited tremendously from the experience summarized its value by quoting Adlai Stephenson, “When you leave here, don’t forget why you came.” Obviously, students are the true beneficiaries of student-led conferences.

¹ Mead School District. Student Survey. Mt. Spokane High School Student-led conferences. 2006-2007.

Serving as an advisor to my students for the past four years, in addition to my full teaching load, has allowed me to actively participate in nearly 100 student-led conferences. The relationships I have cultivated with one group of students over the entirety of their high school experience has provided me with an open window into their personal struggles and victories as they develop into young adults. The culminating conferences highlighted these challenges in a mighty way. As I watched my seniors complete their culminating presentations, I could not help but reflect on the totality of their personal and educational growth, especially in comparison to the laborious student-led conferences of four years ago. Moreover, this conference provided the best evidence for me as an educator to gauge student progress because it demonstrated each student's growth in his/her own voice over the period of several years in many contexts of learning. The statewide emphasis on student-based evidence in administrator and teacher preparation programs, Professional Certification, and National Board Certification further underscores the importance of these reflective gatherings. As a result, it is obvious that educators are also the beneficiaries of student-led conferences.

Each year as the students gather to present their respective learning experiences, other members of the community join the advisor. Whether it be parents listening to their child's accomplishments and challenges or individuals from the broader community who give their time to serve on a recommendation panel, the role of those outside the school is critical in student-led conferences. Although our schools have always enjoyed strong support from our constituency, the student-led conferences have served to strengthen it by giving stakeholders a more meaningful role in student reflection and assessment. Last year alone, a remarkable 100% of the community members who attended the student-led conferences found the conference to be a worthwhile experience.² It is apparent that student-led conferences provide critical evidence to involve and collaborate with families and community members as partners in students' education. Thus, it is community members who receive significant benefits from student-led conferences.

In the climate of educational change and restructuring it remains apparent that it still takes a "village to raise a child." The student-led conferences give a 21st century definition to this reality. Further, when one considers the benefit that these culminating conferences bring to students, educators, and community members it may be more apt to restate the African proverb and realize that it can also "take a child to raise a village."

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² Mead School District. Panelist Survey. Student-led conferences. 2006-2007.