Working with Teachers through Staff Development: Conducting a Successful Parent Conference

Pre-Conference Planning for You and the Teacher

Don’t expect your teachers to be knowledgeable about conducting successful parent conferences unless you work with them. This can be individually or in a staff development setting. As we all know, working with parents can be very stressful and we want our teachers to do the best job possible. I would recommend that you instruct your teachers during the course of several meetings and even do role playing to reinforce your objectives.

You and the teacher(s) must decide if you need to contact the parent for a face to face conference or everything can be resolved over the phone. Usually teachers schedule a parent conference because of the decline in the child’s grades, school work, attitude, or behavior. Teachers should be in contact with the parents over the phone, using notes, or e-mails prior to the parent conference to inform them about the situation in your classroom. Just like you or your teachers would want to be informed about your/their child, so does the parents of your students. Put your self in the parents’ place, they want an open, honest discussion about their child’s progress that they may not receive from an e-mail.

Once you and/or teacher(s) have determined that parent-teacher conferences is necessary and in the best interest of the child, then decide who should be in the conference: other teachers, a counselor, an administrator, the child, or just the teacher and the parent. At our middle school, we do a team approach with teachers, counselors, and administrators meet with the parents. It is not that we want to out number or gang up on the parents but usually if one teacher has a problem then maybe more will as well and it is easier if all teachers meet once then individual teachers several times with the same parents with the same issues.

Here are some points you should work with your teachers concerning parent-teacher conference:

- The teacher should let the child know that you will be setting up a parent conference to discuss issues of concern.
- You or the teacher should contact the parent and establish a mutually convenient meeting time and date. Give yourself enough time to collect pertinent information prior to the conference as well as enough time for you and the parent to establish a meaningful dialogue. Remember the goal is to build trust and a positive relationship between you and the parents, five minutes may not be enough time.
- The teacher should have paper and pen handy during the conference to take notes. This will help the teacher remember important points of the conversation.
- Have someone collect the student’s academic work, referrals and other information for the parent. Most parents want to see what their child is or isn’t doing in the teacher(s) class.
- Remember, this is a cooperative venture between the school and the parent to find the best and mutually acceptable resolution of any problems.

Conference Procedures

Most parents must first go to the main office to register prior to meeting with any teacher. After signing in, then the parent may go to your room, if possible, the teacher or you may wish to meet the parent in the front office or at least try and greet them by the teacher’s door. I would always recommend that you have the conference in the teacher’s classroom. Parents want to see the walls, desks, seating arrangements, textbooks, etc. in their child’s room.

Be aware that some parents may have had unpleasant experiences at school when they were growing up and they may be anxious at the beginning of the conference or that this may not be the first conference that they
have had to attend because of similar issues with their child. Try and make the parent feel as comfortable as possible by being friendly and positive.

The parent should have an idea of why they are meeting with you. Most parents don’t like surprises; please do not discuss something they weren’t prepared for unless they request the information.

Listen carefully and with empathy. Encourage the parents to talk about their child. You can learn a lot about the child and his/her home life by listening to the parent.

Don’t pry into personal matter. Don’t be shocked or judgmental about what parents will say.

Let the parent know that Johnny is not doing what is expected in your class as nicely and professionally as you can. Do not use educational jargon but speak to the parent in a pleasant voice using as much empathy as possible. Your (teacher or you) tone and wording must be expressed this way because most parents are defensive about their child as their child’s behavior is a reflection of them.

Listen to criticism from the parents but you do not have to respond. Often parents will blame everyone but their child or themselves for the situation. Make your points to the parents without challenging them.

Keep discussion on the child and the issues not on other children, teachers, administrators, nor school policies. It amazes me how parents will blame their child’s behavior on the administrator when the referrals usually come from the classroom and we are just reacting to the poor decision that the student made.

Make sure that the parents have the tools needed from you and the school: calendar, agenda, code of conduct booklet, classroom rules, syllabus, phone numbers, etc.

Try to find a resolution of what the four of you: parent, teacher, administrator, and child can do to improve his/her performance in your class. Avoid arguments!

Close the conference when you feel that the issues have been addressed and you have come together for possible solutions. If you run out of time or you feel another conference is necessary, try and schedule one at that time.

Don’t emphasize the past as much as the future and how things will get better if everyone works together. Nothing you or the parent can do will change the past.

Summarize major ideas and issues that were addressed. Don’t just discuss the negative about the child but try and balance your discussion. All students do something well and parents need to know that as well.

Agree upon what action is needed to help with the child’s improvement and stick to it. Don’t confuse the parent by giving them a lot of suggestions to improve. Try a few and see how they work. If they don’t work then try something else.

Many parents don’t want your advice as much as your support and an attentive ear.

If you told the parents you will call next week, make sure you do! There is nothing that will destroy your credibility quicker than if you do not follow through with your promises.

When the conference is over, end the discussion on a positive note and walk the parent back to the office or at least out of your classroom.
If the parent-teacher conference is not going well, you may end the discussion by standing up and walking toward the door, thanking the parent for their concern. Hopefully you can try again at a better time or with a colleague in attendance.

**Dos and Don’ts of a Parent Conference**

**Don’t**

* Attack the child or parent, attack the problem.
* Let the frankness/rudeness of a parent prevent you from continuing to help the child.
* Be shocked by anything said by parents.
* Jump to conclusions.
* Talk down to parents.
* Argue.
* Overlook your resources. Perhaps the counselor, other teachers, or administrator should be consulted.
* Lose sight of your conference goals.
* Let the parent bewildered with no sense of action they need to take.
* Be critical of what happened in the past. Rather, focus on what can be done now.

**Do**

* Be truthful and honest but use tact.
* Plan together with the parent how you will work together to help the child.
* Change a point of view diplomatically.
* Begin and end the conference with something good about the child.
* Be a good listener.
* Respect the parent’s confidence.
* Use your best interpersonal skills.
* Put the parents at ease.
* Ask the parent for his/her advice about resolving the classroom issues.
* Ask the parents what their child has said and feels about school.
* Discuss specifically what is or is not happening at home and at school.
* Develop an action plan for you and the parents.
* Make a follow-up contact with the parents.
* Put yourself in the parents’ “shoes”.
* Remain professional throughout the conference.
* Speak in a positive manner with a pleasant voice.
* Take what the parents say seriously.
* Be empathetic.
* Let parents have plenty of opportunity to talk about what concerns them.
* Always remember that parents are vital to student success.

Good Luck with Your Parent Conference!

Les Potter, Ed. D.
Principal
Silver Sands Middle School
1300 Herbert Street
Port Orange, Florida 32129
lpotter@volusia.k12.fl.us
386-322-6175