

ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT
ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

ASD MEMORANDUM #110 (2006-2007)

January 17, 2007

TO: SCHOOL BOARD

FROM: OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

SUBJECT: MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES UPDATE

ASD Goals: Establish and maintain a supportive and effective learning environment by providing safe, caring, barrier-free schools and challenging each student academically. Ensure public accountability through effective communication with students, staff, parents, community and government at all levels.

PERTINENT FACTS:

Implementing student-led conferences is a Districtwide middle school initiative that meets two goals: supportive and effective learning environment as well as public accountability. The National Middle School Association supports the practice of student-led conferences:

"Since early adolescence is a crucial period in establishing a clear self-concept and positive self-esteem, assessment and evaluation should emphasize individual progress rather than comparison with other students. The goal is to help students discover and understand their strengths, weaknesses, interests, values, and personalities. Student self-evaluation is an important means of developing a fair and realistic self-concept."

[National Middle School Association \(NMSA\)](#) *This We Believe* Position Paper, 1995

In a student-led conference, the student tells the story of his/her learning. Using a portfolio representing work samples from the respective time period, a student describes his/her educational growth. This is an opportunity for students to make learning active, to self-reflect and evaluate performance, and to discover who they are as learners. In a student-led conference, the student showcases not only strengths, but also set goals to improve in areas of weakness.

Student-led conferences began with a few teams across the District recognizing the need to improve parent-teacher-student communication. Asking parents to wait in long lines

to talk with teachers on conference days was frustrating for many parents. Teachers were growing increasingly concerned as they saw parents choose not to attend conferences because of the long wait time. Clearly this was not in the best interest of the students.

These same teams began to look at how to restructure middle school conferences. They decided to incorporate scheduling of specific times for parents, as in the elementary model, while also incorporating middle school research on developmentally appropriate practices for evaluation. These teams creatively offered their 120+ families assigned conference times and used student portfolios to monitor academic, social, and emotional growth. Although the student became the main voice at the conference, the teachers remained present to interact with the family and to discuss student progress.

It was critical to take into account the developmental needs of middle school students when designing a conference which would also be an effective assessment tool rather than just a time to report grade progress. The traditional parent-teacher conference did not typically address the developmental standards that encourage students to accept more responsibility for their learning. Student-led conferences shifted the focus from talking about students to talking directly with them.

How the Initiative Grew

The use of student-led conferences grew out of the work of a few visionary teams. It spread from school to school when attendance figures began to rise. Parents offered positive feedback and felt the time was far more productive than the traditional parent-teacher conference format. At middle school, scheduling 120 families is challenging with only 6.5 hours of conference time. To address this problem, the state was petitioned for an extra half-day of inservice, which then allowed for a total of 13 hours of possible conferencing time. Below is an approximate timeline of the student-led conference groundswell at middle school:

2000 - 2001 Two teams at Romig experiment with alternative parent-teacher conference formats under the leadership of Sophia Dawson-Masewicz.

2001 - 2002 Goldenview implements student-led conferences on the Neon Team, and the Mercury Team joins them in the spring. Hanshew also has a spring pilot with one team. The Hanshew team has such success that plans are made to implement school-wide in the fall. Under the leadership of Gail Opalinski and Jan Christensen, Hanshew petitions the state for additional inservice time

2002 - 2003 Hanshew is the first school to implement school-wide, student-led conferences with the new two-day/two-night model. Goldenview continues to have a

number of teams implement student-led conferences via a shorter, one-day model. Mirror Lake also has a team implementing student-led conferences.

2003 - 2004 Hanshew, Goldenview and Mirror Lake continue with the same formats. One team pilots at Gruening in the spring of 2004.

2004 - 2005 Due to the success of the two-day student-led conference model, a goal for Districtwide middle school implementation is written into the Six-Year Instructional Plan. The goal included one to two schools moving into a full two-day model each year. Wendler volunteers to implement school-wide, student-led conferences with extended time from the State. Goldenview, Gruening, and Mirror Lake continue to have isolated teams implement student-led conferences in a one-day format.

2005 - 2006 Central and Gruening volunteer to implement school-wide, student-led conferences with extended time from the state. Under the leadership of Mike Perkins, the staff at Mears decides to try student-led conferences informally with only a one-day schedule. Under the leadership of Julie Maker, Goldenview looks ahead to full implementation by having all teams use student-led conferences at least once during the year.

2006 - 2007 All nine middle schools participate in formal training. Mears, Romig, and Clark volunteer to implement school-wide, student-led conferences with extended time from the state. This results in seven of the nine schools implementing student-led conferences. Mirror Lake has one team participating, while Goldenview has all teams participating, at least once during the school year.

Staff Development Ongoing Training:

In 2005-2006, a long-term plan was created for formal training. Up to this point, teams were training each other and schools were relying on the experience from the other sites. Although healthy collaboration was occurring, a more formal training plan was needed with five more schools preparing to implement student-led conferences.

2005-2006 Channel 14 chronicles the progress of two teams implementing student-led conferences at Hanshew. The intent is to produce a 15-minute training tape for teachers to be used across the District in the fall of 2006. The final DVD includes the following with section breaks for staff discussion:

- Opening montage set to music illustrating conferences across the District
- Introduction and review of critical elements of a student-led conference by the Executive Director of Middle Schools
- Teacher preparation
- Student preparation

- Clips from two actual student-led conferences
- Exit interviews from teachers, parents, and students

Middle school teacher experts, Amy Goodman, Ruth Mount, Robby Bear, and Jan Davis, create a half-day training template to be delivered at each middle school in the fall. The focus is on increasing teacher interaction during student-led conferences along with strengthening co-curricular roles (elective, physical education, ESL, Sp. Ed., etc.) The plan includes cooperative learning strategies to help teachers learn best practices for effectively implementing student-led conferences. The ABC's of student-led conferences is adopted:

- A = Actively Engaged
- B = Balanced Portfolios
- C = Continuous Communication

Resources to support student-led conferences are uploaded on the Middle Link, an ASD Web site devoted to teachers and parents at the middle school level (<http://www.asdk12.org/middlelink>).

Mid-level education provides multiple copies of professional books for their staff to be used in study groups throughout the following year.

- *Implementing Student-Led Conferences* by Jane M. Bailey, Thomas R. Guskey (Corwin Press, 2000)
- *A School-wide Approach to Student-Led Conferences* by Patti Kinney, Mary Beth Munroe, & Pam Sessions (National Middle School Association, 2000)

2006-2007 Every school receives a half-day inservice on student-led conferences delivered by the following teacher experts:

- Amy Goodman (Middle School Literacy Support Teacher)
- Jan Davis (Middle School Social and Emotional Learning Support Teacher)
- Michelle Barton (Middle School Technology Support Teacher)
- Ruth Mount (Middle School Math Support Teacher)
- Robby Bear (Secondary Science Support Teacher)
- Brenda Fenton (Middle School Gifted Coordinator)

Round 1 Visits - Teacher experts visit every school in September and meet with teams during team planning time as a follow-up to the August training. This is a formal training.

Principals' Meetings Dialogue regarding the content of the professional books on student-led conferences. Teacher experts present to share progress at all of the schools.

Round 2 Visits - Teacher experts visit every school in October, again during team time, to ensure all teams have the necessary resources for successful implementation. This is an informal meeting with teacher experts providing resources as requested by individual teams.

Middle School Counselor Department Chair Meeting - Teacher experts present a summary of student-led conference research and ASD implementation to the counselors in October. A collaborative dialogue on the positive role that counselors can play ensues.

Principals' Meeting - Teacher experts model a 30-minute staff meeting template at their November meeting to be used in December at each site to debrief on the successes and challenges of implementing student-led conferences.

How We Know It's Working:

Longitudinal attendance records have been kept reflecting the participation level at conferences. There is a substantial increase in parent attendance at schools after implementation of student-led conferences. Below is a table that shows the change in parent attendance at fall conferences the first year the following seven schools implemented the two-day student-led conference model.

School	Year	Student-Led Conferences Attendance	Previous Fall Attendance	Percent Change
Hanshew	2002-2003	86%	65%	21%
Wendler	2004-2005	65%	58%	7%
Central	2005-2006	75%	62%	13%
Gruening	2005-2006	91%	78%	13%
Clark	2006-2007	75%	62%	13%
Mears	2006-2007	82%	70%	12%
Romig	2006-2007	90%	78%	12%

This fall, a standardized parent feedback form was made available to every family during student-led conferences. Below is a list of the items asked and the Districtwide average parent responses. Baseline data was gathered for each school implementing the two-day student-led conference model. Results were shared with each school and team

to provide staff a chance to reflect on their implementation and set goals for spring 2007 conferences.

Items on Parent Feedback Form	Average Response (1 - 5/ low-high scale)
My child was prepared for the conference.	4.38
I now have a better understanding of how my child learns.	4.22
I have a clear picture about what my child has been studying this quarter in each subject area.	4.33
I have a better understanding of my child's effort, study skills, and classroom behavior in each subject area.	4.43
Each of my child's core teachers made a point to make contact with me during the student-led conference.	4.18
My child's Elective/PE teachers provided information about my child's progress.	4.0
The student-led conference was valuable and informative.	4.40

Administration, staff and students at the middle schools are all pleased with the student-led conferences. Enthusiastic participation of students, along with improved attendance of parents, has resulted in better communication among teachers, students and parents and enhanced self concept for the students.

CC/RG/LV

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