

Parent-teacher conferences provide parents with updates on their child's progress and opportunities to see their student's work. They also open communication between school and home. However, students often are passive, or even absent, during traditional parent-teacher conferences. One way to fix this is to put students at the helm, as they are the ones who are responsible for their work and progress. Here, we detail a few ways to hold effective student-led conferences and we offer a guide for each conference participant.

## What Is a Student-Led Conference?



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In the student-led conference format, students and teachers prepare together, and then students lead the conference while teachers facilitate. “The triad then sits together to review and discuss the work and the student’s progress. The message, once again, 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.”

## Why Conduct Student-Led Conferences?

During traditional parent-teacher conferences, parents ask how their students are doing, and teachers provide grades and behavior reports. While these conferences *seem* to offer a final answer, they do not paint a clear picture of students.

According to Gus Goodwin, a teacher featured in the book, “[Deeper Learning: How Eight Innovative Public Schools Are Transforming Education in the Twenty-First Century](#)” (which in turn was quoted in this excellent [MindShift](#) article) is quoted as saying that parents appreciate student-led conferences as an alternative because they realize report cards are not useful, “and over time, the parents begin to set a higher bar for their students at these conferences.”

Adjusting to the new conferences takes 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.

Furthermore, teachers report more satisfaction with student-led conferences. In an [Education World article](#), Keith Eddinger explains that, "from a teacher's perspective, we were able to get a better picture of each child. It forced us to sit down with each student and review strengths and weaknesses. This conversation often told us the students learned more than perhaps we had measured through conventional assessments."

## Teacher Roles in the Student-Led Conference

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* than during conference time.

In 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. One strategy is to suggest discussion starters, such as "I do better in math when I..." 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 student, so teachers need to guide discussions in a supportive manner that eliminates blame. For this reason, teachers instruct students to begin on a positive note with their strengths and then work through their challenges and areas of improvement. Next, teachers encourage families to create strategies for supporting student growth and improvement, such as setting aside designated homework/reading time or creating quiet study and work environments at home.

## Students as Conference Leaders

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.

After assembling the portfolio, students maintain them in an organized fashion. Students who don't understand their teachers' requirements must ask questions if they are unsure about what to include. Usually, students use [self-evaluation checklists or learning surveys](#) to determine their areas of strength and weakness and set learning goals. 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. Most important, 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 should take advantage of this time and ask for help or guidance if they are especially nervous about their conferences. They 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 Roles in the Student-Led Conference

Parents are accustomed to the traditional conferences and will likely want to ask teachers about classroom behaviors and performance. Thus, parents find the most difficulty in 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 a student's classroom efforts. This way they can participate in developing strategies to support their students and then remain consistent long after the conferences end. This also helps them to be open-minded about their children's areas of improvement and to support their goal-setting process. For parents, it's important to embrace the student-led conference format and allow children to take the reins so they can act as responsible learners.

## In Short

Student-led conferences can be very successful in opening communication between school and home, but only if every participant understands their roles and responsibilities. This guide helps to educate participants on their roles during a student-led conference, what they can expect, and how to best use this opportunity to benefit the student, family, and teacher.