

STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES

At

BUCKLANDS BEACH INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

What is a student-led conference?

We are by now all quite familiar with the traditional *3-way conference* where the student, the teacher, and the student's parent/s or caregiver/s meet at intervals throughout the school year to discuss progress. A significant failing with this type of conference however is that all too frequently the student becomes the reluctant bystander, sitting and listening to comments being made by teachers and parents as to what could have been done, or maybe should have been done, to achieve better results. Too often little effort is made to engage students in the reporting process. They do not see themselves as being involved. There are discussions **about** them, rather than **with** them.

The student is not a bystander, but is in fact the prime reason for the meeting taking place. Students should be recognised as significant partners in the learning and reporting process and be encouraged to develop a growing understanding that they are able to make a positive difference for their own future. The *student-led conference* can help them gain this understanding where procedures are developed to assist scaffold students through the process.

The primary difference between the *student-led conference* and the more traditional *3-way conference* is that with the former the student is required to become involved in preparing for and participating in the conference, rather than is frequently the case with the latter, where the student is often the passive bystander, contributing on occasion following the teacher's lead. With the *student-led conference* the student is delegated the responsibility for taking the leading role during conference discussions and demonstrating how they have made progress as a learner. Prior guidance and preparation is required to enable this to occur.

The primary purpose of the *student-led conference* is to enable students to become actively involved in reporting their progress as learners to their parents. They take a leading role during conference discussions, accepting accountability and responsibility for their progress, demonstrating a growing understanding of their development as independent learners.

How do we prepare for the conference?

We often hear teachers claim they are working to develop independent learners. The real challenge is for the teacher to demonstrate how this is being done. Do they have specific strategies in place that will actually assist students achieve this goal? If we wish students to accept a greater degree of responsibility, and also accountability, for their learning, we must scaffold them through the required steps.

In line with this school's overall philosophy teachers work to ensure students understand that they can make a positive difference for their own future. Teachers guide them towards an understanding that learning is something *they do*, rather than it being something that is *done to* them. One important strategy in assisting students work towards achieving this goal is through their involvement in reporting their progress to their parents.

Prior to the conference taking place discussions at school should be held so students understand their responsibilities during the allocated conference time. They will be required to understand that they are accountable for finding and presenting specific evidence to show the progress they have made as a learner. To achieve this level of understanding it is necessary for the teacher to allocate time in class, prior to the conference, for preparations to be undertaken with the teacher's support. Students will use one of the formats provided by the school, or an alternate one developed by the teacher, to help scaffold them through the process.

Students should be encouraged to find evidence to present at the conference that will demonstrate the progress they have made since the start of the school year and/or since the last scheduled conference period. Prior goal setting could be used to assist.

The scaffolding process will encourage students to identify their strengths, to identify areas for further development and to identify the future steps they may be able to take to move further forward as a learner. They should be asked to identify two or three items they wish to share at the conference to illustrate progress made. (Any more than this will not be able to be covered in the limited time frame generally scheduled for conference discussions.)

It is suggested that students be given the opportunity to role-play the conference, prior to the scheduled event, to ensure they have a clear understanding of their individual responsibilities. This is particularly recommended where they may not have had the opportunity to participate in a *student-led conference* in the past. This role-play will enable students to learn from each other and to gain confidence in their ability to communicate clearly.

Teachers could organise students into groups of three with each taking on a different role.

Eg one is the teacher, one a parent and the other the student.

As the student: -

- *What will you do when your parents arrive?*
- *Have you completed your planning sheet to guide you through the process?*
- *Have you sorted out the things you are going to share?*
- *Do your examples provide specific evidence of learning?*
- *Have you marked them in some way so you can find them quickly?*
- *Are you able to comment honestly on the things you have done well and also the areas you need to work on in the future?*
- *Have you checked the timing so you do not go on for too long?*

As the parent: -

- *Do you know what to expect during the conference?*
- *Are you prepared to listen to your son or daughter and comment positively with respect to improvements noted?*
- *Can you help work with the student and the teacher to set learning goals for the future?*

- *Are you able to determine how you can help the student reach the goals they set?*
- *Can you think of any questions you would specifically like to ask?*

As the teacher: -

- *Have you prepared students adequately for their role prior to the conference?*
- *Can you be encouraging as students show work of which they are proud?*
- *Can you help the student to answer any questions that may be asked?*
- *Can you monitor what is happening to ensure students are being honest and are commenting on the key reporting areas – strengths and future needs?*
- *Are you monitoring the time to make sure the student does not use up all the allocated time available?*
- *Can you ensure the conference concludes with the setting of future learning goals?*

What happens at the conference?

It is expected that with appropriate prior planning and role-play, the student will feel sufficiently empowered to take the leading role during the structured conference. The teacher, who has traditionally taken the lead, is there to guide the process and to encourage and support the student. It is important to remember that we are talking about a *student-led* conference. That means it is the *student* who does the leading and hopefully most of the talking, at least in the initial stages.

It would be expected that a typical conference would progress as follows: -

- The student should be encouraged to introduce their parent/s or caregiver/s to the teacher, particularly if it is the first meeting for the year.
- After everyone is seated the student would use their completed planning sheet to guide them through the reporting process.
- The student would outline areas of strength and illustrate this with an example or two from their portfolio or from other material available within the room.

Support would be offered from the teacher with positive feedback being received also from the parent/caregiver.

- The student would then move on to discuss an area they need to work on in the future. Reflection from work within the portfolio could be used to assist demonstrate their need.
- The teacher would offer support again at this stage and perhaps assist by offering examples of the difficulties being experienced. They would be able to further reinforce the student's comments with respect to strengths and to provide additional guidance as to what the student may need to work on in the future.
- Discussions would continue within the scheduled time frame in the normal manner with the teacher, the parent and the student all participating. It is essential for the student to feel a part of the discussions and to be fully involved in an open and honest manner where the focus is clearly on their learning strengths and needs. They must be encouraged to believe they can make a difference for their own future learning. Steps should be provided to illustrate how this can be achieved.
- The final stage of the conference would look towards future goal setting. Discussions should centre on the setting of a goal or goals that are to be achieved prior to the next scheduled reporting period.
- A commitment should be made and recorded.
 - *What is it you will be able to show you have achieved when next we meet?*
 - *Can we record these needs as specific goals?*
 - *What does the teacher commit to do to help the student achieve the goal/s?*
 - *What will the parent/caregiver commit to do to assist the student achieve the goal/s?*
 - *When would you expect that these goals would be achieved?*
- This goal, or these goals, will form the basis for future planning within the room and also for later discussions at the next scheduled interviews.
- Throughout the conference the teachers would be guiding and supporting the student and also recording a summary of key decisions being made.

In summary it is the student who takes the lead for the first part of the conference. That should be for at least one third of the allocated time. More general discussions would then take place related to the student's progress leading to the recording of clear future goals to be achieved.

What happens afterwards?

It is important teachers allow some time for discussions in class after the conferences. Students should be assisted to set their next learning goals taken directly from the agreements made at the conference. It should be simply a matter of recording what was agreed during the discussions. The school's *goal setting* format will once again assist scaffold the students through this process. They will record their goal/s along with the steps they will take to see the goal is achieved.

The process begins again leading up to the next reporting period with the student understanding they will once more be asked to be accountable for demonstrating clearly that they have made progress in the area/s agreed. They will know they will be asked to provide specific evidence of learning and will therefore need to keep work samples that can be used to show this improvement. These samples should show evidence of process in addition to evidence of a finished product. The student *Portfolio* is the logical place where these samples could be kept.

As students become actively involved in *student-led conferences* they will develop a growing understand of how they can make a positive difference for their own future by accepting an increasing degree of responsibility for their own learning needs. They will develop the skills to identify their current strengths, to be able to reflect upon their learning outcomes, and to determine their own future needs. They will know that the classroom teacher is always on hand to offer appropriate guidance and support.

Buckland's Beach Intermediate has for many years worked to encourage students to develop as independent learners, understanding that they can make a positive difference for their own future development. These understandings do not occur without some positive steps on the teacher's behalf. It is the teacher who puts in place structures within the classroom to scaffold students through the processes that will

lead ultimately to their growing independence as learners. The *student-led conference* is but one more way teachers can assist with this process.

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