



Changing Schools in Louisville

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The Highs and Lows of Parent-Teacher Conferences

By Holly Holland

Eric Walthall, a seventh-grader with brown hair and wire glasses, sits at a classroom conference table with his mother Tammy and his language arts teacher Dena Kent. Eyes cast downward and palms sweating, he's giving a report of his recent progress at Iroquois Middle School.

"I know I talk too much in school," he says to his mother. "I wanted you to hear this from me first. Other than that, I got pretty good grades."

Reading from his self-evaluation, Eric describes his goals: to do more independent reading, to become a veterinarian, to concentrate in class.

Kent congratulates him for his candor and his willingness to see his positive and negative traits. Then she gently asks him a series of questions designed to draw him out.

"You say you deserve an A in your (writing) portfolio, but you got a B," she says. After hesitating a moment, Eric admits that he has missed some assignment deadlines.

"Why is that, Eric?" Kent asks.

"I was looking for some better ideas," he says.

He pauses. Kent keeps silent.

"And I talked too much with my friends," he says.

A few minutes later, Kent steers the conversation in another direction. "What do you like about yourself, Eric?" she asks.

"That I'm getting good grades in everything but social studies."

<http://www.middleweb.com/CSLV2TchrConf.html>

10/7/04

"What is it about social studies that makes it different?" Kent asks. "You're very analytical. Think about it."

Eric doesn't have an answer. After a moment, he begins to read from his evaluation again. "One way my teachers have helped me is to push me to do my best," he reports.

When Eric finishes his self-evaluation, Dena Kent shows his mother samples of his writing, describing the purpose of each assignment and how it meets the goals of the Kentucky Education Reform Act. Then she asks whether they have any questions or concerns.

Mrs. Walthall thinks Eric may have been marked absent incorrectly one day. Kent promises to look into the matter and thanks them for coming in. A few minutes later, the process begins again, and another Iroquois 7th grader sweats out Dena Kent's unusual approach to the parent-teacher conference.

Student-led conferences emphasize responsibility

Three years ago, when the Jefferson County Public Schools began requiring schools to schedule conferences with parents at least once a semester, Dena Kent decided to involve a third party in the discussions – her students.

Each spring, about a week before the conferences begin, Kent asks each student to write a formal letter of introduction to their parents and a self-evaluation that identifies their strengths, weaknesses and career goals. To give them a better idea of what she expects, she shows them videotapes of former students leading their own conferences. Then she conducts practice sessions so her students can polish their presentations.

Kent believes that when students accept responsibility for their own academic performance, they begin to understand that school is not just something that happens to them. The student-led conferences, she says, also underscore that point for parents. "When students deliver the bad news, parents are more receptive. It's not the teacher to blame."

While most parents appreciate hearing their children's self-appraisals, others question giving so much control over the conferences to adolescents. Some say they would prefer to talk to Kent alone.

"It sort of put a crimp on things," Cathy Messex says after she leaves a conference with her daughter Alison. "I find this a little intimidating. If I had concerns, I wouldn't feel comfortable saying anything in front of Alison. I can't say I got a lot out of it."

But Iroquois Principal Mark Rose supports Kent's approach. He believes that while all teachers go into conferences with the intention of communicating well with parents, some are more effective than others. Kent's method of including students in the evaluation is one he "would like to do more formally schoolwide in the future."

Asking students to assess their own work teaches them to accept responsibility for their actions and effort, Rose says. "The more we can get kids to understand that, the better off they'll be in life."

The parent-teacher dilemma

Effective and efficient communication with families presents a dilemma for middle school educators throughout Jefferson County. The middle years are tough enough on parents – as emerging teenagers, children often become more distant, more independent and more unpredictable. The schools they attend can seem the same way.

When students reach the middle grades, they learn from up to six different teachers a day, instead of the one teacher most had in elementary school. From the family's perspective, staying in touch with school becomes more difficult than ever before.

"I don't think there's enough communication going on," said a mother with two children at Meyzeek Middle School, where she was waiting outside a classroom on conference day last March. The mother, who declined to give her name, said she rarely hears from teachers unless her children are in trouble or until they've fallen so far behind in their assignments they can't catch up. Periodic school newsletters, one of Meyzeek's efforts to alert families to activities, mean little to this mother because they don't tell her "anything about my child."

"The teachers know if they're not doing their homework or responding in class. I need to know that," she said. "To some teachers it comes naturally to talk with parents. But some teachers want to put the blame on us and don't realize we're both there for one accord – the children."

Research has shown convincingly that children do better in school when their parents are actively involved in their education. But barriers inside and outside school tend to limit that contact, from the resistance of teachers to the reluctance of parents. Both groups can be defensive.

Jefferson County's annual parent-teacher conferences are an obvious place to start building better relationships. Participation by parents and teachers has grown steadily in the past three years – more than twice as many middle school conferences were held this school year, for instance, compared to two years ago.

JCPS leaders like Middle School Advocate Sandy Ledford believe the conferences are the perfect place for teachers and parents to talk about the higher academic standards the district expects children to meet, and how families can help make that happen. But two days of observations and interviews during the March sessions make it clear that while many good things go on during parent-teacher conferences, the district needs to do a better job helping teachers and parents focus on student success.

- The quality of the conferences varied markedly from classroom to classroom. In nearly every case, parents didn't know what to expect until they walked into the meetings.
- Only one teacher discussed the academic standards that students were supposed to meet and explained their progress toward those goals. Other teachers talked about particular assignments or tests, but never told parents what their children were supposed to learn and why. The focus was on the grades the students had earned, not the skills they were expected to master.
- For the most part, teachers demonstrated a remarkable degree of care and knowledge about each child. They painted detailed pictures of their study habits, school friendships and emotional development.

- Although some teachers used jargon and occasionally spoke patronizingly to parents, some parents also damaged the process by failing to show up for scheduled meetings or emotionally abusing their children in the presence of teachers.
- Some schools have gone to great lengths to work with parents – including asking teachers to make home visits and offering to bring parents to school when they don't have transportation. Yet, too often, parents of the most troubled students refuse to get involved.

Stephon Gilkey, director of Meyzeek's Youth Service Center, says he sees the problems on all sides because he works closely with parents and teachers. In his view, both groups have room for improvement. "My biggest thing is when parents go up for conferences, sometimes they come back more confused than when they went in," Gilkey says. "The language and vocabulary and sometimes the degrading way parents are talked to" don't help.

"I think what parents want is to be wanted and to feel important," he adds. "They really want the kids to do well, but sometimes they're not willing to do anything to make that happen."

When communication breaks down

At one Meyzeek conference, an eighth-grade boy with shaggy hair, a pierced ear and a permanent slouch seems as uncomfortable as a prisoner on trial. Six adults – four teachers and his divorced parents – sit around a table and discuss his performance. It's the fourth time they have met this school year. This time, his parents have brought him along.

Mike Bennett, the boy's social studies teacher, describes his rapid descent over the grading period from an A to an F. And yet, Bennett points out, the boy earned the only perfect score on a recent test.

Greta Heady, his math teacher, asks the boy to tell his parents why he is struggling in her class. "When I look at it, it looks hard," he says in a barely audible voice. "I look at the problems on the board and I can't do it."

"That's it!" Heady exclaims. "When I'm teaching him, he gives me 15 minutes and then he shuts down. If I can't communicate the lesson in 15 minutes, he won't do it. His percentages are in the 20s. This test is the first he's completed."

For the next few minutes, as the boy slinks lower in his seat, his estranged parents make snide remarks to each other and take turns blaming each other for the boy's problems.

"I don't see him taking notes," she says. "He watches on the board and then he puts his head down. At the beginning of the year, I was at his shoulder whenever his head went down. But at this point in eighth grade, he's got to take some responsibility."

Heady suggests that the boy attend a free tutoring program after school. Science teacher Tom White and language arts teacher Sharon Shuster explain the days they will be available after school to help. Trying to interject something positive into the discussion, White points out that the boy is getting to class on time more often instead of lingering in the hall.

In an icy voice, the boy's mother says she wants to hear from teachers instead of administrators whenever her son is tardy.

"For tardies, I guess I have more important things to worry about," one teacher shoots back. Shuster praises the boy for asking "good, probing questions" in class, but says he needs to pay more attention to his writing assignments.

For the next few minutes, as the boy slinks lower in his seat, his estranged parents make snide remarks to each other and take turns blaming each other for the boy's problems. Although the boy wants to attend Shawnee High School's aviation program, his mother says she is going to put him in a Catholic school because he "needs the structure and discipline. He's always a step behind, like his father."

After the family leaves, the four teachers shake their heads sadly.

The ingredients of a successful conference

Most parents say they are grateful that the school district has set aside specific days for conferences. In general, they are pleased with the meetings. But more training and resources would help. The school district produced a manual for teachers and informational brochures for parents. The University of Louisville also distributed a video for teachers. None of these was considered particularly useful by the targeted groups, however.

Teachers who have trouble talking to parents could benefit from watching exemplary colleagues in action. One approach adopted by Meyzeek Principal Debbie Baker is to participate in a parent conference with a teacher, demonstrating effective techniques. Baker says she intervenes when a teacher asks for help or when she's not sure how well a new teacher will handle the conference.

"There are some things that should be part of every conference," she says. "The parent should leave with some ways that they can help that child. If all the teacher is doing is saying, 'These are the child's strengths and weaknesses,' that's not very useful.

"Most of the time the parents know the child better than we do. If I as a parent can go back and make things better (as a result of the conference), then I've gotten something valuable. Parents have a lot of skills to help children, but they don't always have the skills to make an academic difference."

When teachers successfully bring parents into the school family, the impact is remarkable. Consider the case of Becky, a mother of four, who has two children in middle school. One morning in March, she is pacing in the parking lot of the transitional shelter where she lives when Ann Ames, Meyzeek's home-school coordinator, arrives to pick her up for a teacher conference.

"I feel really good about this," says one parent who is struggling to put her own life back together. "I used to think it was all up to them to make him learn. Now I think it's much more of a give and take. Everybody has to put in the time or we're going to lose a lot of kids."

Becky has spent the last six months in a program for recovering alcoholics. During that time she temporarily lost custody of three of her children. Now, she says, she is ready to take charge of her life again and begin to help them with theirs. One of her sons, a seventh-grader, had been most affected by her drinking and absences from home.

"We're glad to see you," Ruscelia White, the boy's science teacher, says to Becky when the conference begins. "You have a lovely, young son. He's well-mannered. He does have a problem bringing in his assignments. We really are concerned about him. We want him to make it."

"When he does it, he does beautiful work," says social studies teacher Libby Enlow.

Becky provides some details of her personal troubles, but says she's now in a better position help her son succeed in school. She suggests that the teachers require the boy to get her signature and theirs on homework assignments to verify that he has completed the work. They agree, and they also support Becky's suggestion that her son resume taking the drug Ritalin to control his hyperactivity. The teachers also suggest that he stay after school for tutoring.

"I'm willing to try anything and everything to get back on track," Becky says.

"We all care about him," says math teacher Cindy Hayes Nichols. "I think he knows that." After the meeting, Becky smiles as she walks down the halls of the school. She says she feels as if she's tossed a heavy weight from her shoulders.

"I feel really good about this," she says. "They had confidence in him. They're open-minded. That's all I ask. I used to think it was all up to them to make him learn. Now I think it's much more of a give and take. Everybody has to put in the time or we're going to lose a lot of kids.

"It takes more than teachers to make good students." says the mother of four. "It takes parents, too."

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"Building Better Parent Partnerships" -- Ideas for successful teacher-parent conferences