

Meeting of the Minds

The parent-teacher conference is the cornerstone of school-home relations. How can it work for all families?

by LAURA PAPPANO

Agnes Jackson isn't proud to admit it, but last year she didn't attend a single parent-teacher conference for her youngest son, who just completed third grade at the Thomas O'Brien Academy of Science and Technology in Albany, New York.

It's not as if she didn't try. Jackson did respond when the school asked her to select a time for a face-to-face meeting. "They asked me what time could I be there and I told them, but they said, 'Oh, somebody already took that,'" says Jackson, a single mother of three who works nights as a certified nursing assistant. She made several impromptu visits to the school, whose website touts it as a "nationally recognized Blue Ribbon School of Excellence," but each time her son's teacher was unavailable. "They'd say, 'You need to wait until school is over,'" she recalls.

The parent-teacher conference may be the most critical, yet awkward, ritual in the school calendar. It is treated as a key barometer of parental involvement, so important that a Texas lawmaker earlier this year proposed fining parents \$500 and charging them with a Class C misdemeanor for skipping one. New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg wants to pay poor families up to \$5,000 a year to meet goals, including attending parent-teacher conferences.

Yet, in practice, these conferences can be ill-defined encounters whose very high-pressure design—bringing together a child's two most powerful daily influences for sometimes super-brief meetings about academic and social progress—make them a volatile element in home-school relations. For schools, parent-teacher conferences can be a nightmare to organize and may leave teachers spinning after hours of quick encounters. For parents, sessions can feel more like speed-dating than team-building and may encourage snap judgments.

Surveys of K–8 parent involvement conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics indicate that a majority of parents attended parent-teacher conferences in 2003. Yet, many are still absent. Those parents who might most need to show often don't or can't. The most involved can now, in a growing number of districts, access their child's homework, grades, and attendance online.

Given the weight that parents and teachers place on these once- or twice-a-year get-togethers, what can schools do to ensure that parent-teacher conferences are effective and productive—and meet the needs of all families?

The "Two-Way" Conference

Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey, associate professor and chair of the department of psychology and human development at Vanderbilt University, who studies home-school communication, says face-to-face conversations are more effective than written notes and e-mails, especially when the teacher has concerns or suggestions to make. For parents, "the heart just leaps a bit at the thought that something is wrong," she says. Conferences should include a chance for parents to share observations or concerns, specifics from the teacher about positive things a child is doing, and thoughts on how the teacher and parent might support a child's performance, Hoover-Dempsey says.

Many schools are rethinking conferences to make them less a complaint session and more a collaborative discussion, she says. "People are really starting to talk about the 'two-way parent-teacher conference' and the 'mutually respectful parent-teacher conference.' The conference is not for me to give you my judgment, but for us to share experiences and suggestions about things we can do to really support this child's education."

Collaborative conferences can be promoted by "bundling" them with other chances for parents and teachers to communicate, according to Karen Mapp, lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a coauthor of *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*. Very effective schools may hold several face-to-face conferences each year, including some in which students present their schoolwork and share responses to questions they have pondered in advance, says Mapp, former deputy superintendent for family and community engagement for the Boston Public Schools. Others may be times for parents and teachers to meet solo and discuss an agenda agreed upon in advance. The key, says Mapp, is that the school community should shape how conference time is used.

Shifting Dynamics: A Larger Role for Parents

Building a two-way exchange, says Janet Chrispeels, professor of education studies at the University of California at San Diego, also requires shifting the dynamic of the conference from *reporting on* a child to *eliciting from* parents a better understanding of a child's

strengths at home, in order to provide clues to helping them at school. Questions that might reveal these clues include:

What homework habits does your child have that make you proud?

In what ways is your child working up to his or her expectations?

What things at school make your child happiest? Most upset?

Think of a time when your child dealt with a difficult situation that made you very proud. What did you see as the strengths of your child in that situation?

Chrispeels, who trains teachers in conducting parent conferences, says such questions are important both for the information they provide teachers and because they position parents as partners in their child's schooling. The process also lets parents know that teachers realize children may be acting differently at school than at home.

Teachers should be prepared to show concrete examples of academic expectations, including student papers with names removed. "Teachers need to be able to explain to parents, 'Here is the range of work in this class,'" says Chrispeels. That way, she says, parents can have a better idea of what the teacher will be encouraging students to achieve in the future.

Chrispeels advocates ending conferences with what she calls a "one to grow on" message, to let parents know what the teacher intends to do to address any areas of weakness—and how the parent might help at home. Sometimes that can be as simple as explaining what skills they are working on in school and what resources are available to help students outside of school, like a before-school phonics help session.

Even parents of children who are doing well in school need reassurance that their child is developmentally, socially, and intellectually on track, says Chrispeels. Teachers also have experience and information to relay, for example, about planning high school course loads to meet graduation and college-entrance requirements. This helps parents anticipate a child's stresses and needs.

Facilitating Participation

More parent-teacher dialogue means schools must work harder to meet parents on their turf and tailor meetings to suit particular lifestyles and needs. Because their parent populations can vary significantly, school administrators are using different approaches to facilitate parent-teacher conferencing.

At Arlington (Mass.) High School, an upper-middle-class suburb of Boston where 72 percent of graduates go on to four-year colleges, parents can now sign up online for five-minute, face-to-face parent-teacher conferences. It's so popular that when administrators opened up the conference registration at midnight in the fall of 2004, 200 slots were booked in the first 10 minutes. Principal Charles Skidmore says online registration gives parents more choice and control and that, as a result, teachers are drawing more parents to conferences. "We are seeing some of the 'hard-to-reach' parents," Skidmore reports.

The situation is much different at the K–8 Robert L. Ford School in Lynn, Mass., where 90 percent of students are low-income and 58.5 percent speak English as a second language. Principal Claire Crane has created multiple ways for parents and teachers to talk, including holding parent-teacher conferences as early as 7 a.m. and as late as 9 p.m. (see sidebar "Laying the Groundwork for Successful Parent-Teacher Conferences").

Laying the Groundwork for Successful Parent-Teacher Conferences

To foster parent-teacher talk—formal or informal—Claire Crane, principal of the Robert L. Ford School in Lynn, Mass., has structured her school to get parents in the building as often as she can. Many are recent immigrants working two or three jobs, so she lures them to school by meeting their needs. School is open Monday and Tuesday until 9 p.m., when 250 parents attend English as a Second Language classes and a course on surviving in the U.S. Ford staff members teach the classes and provide babysitting and a chance to connect.

The school also operates like a community center. Parents perform in neighborhood talent shows, raise money, and plant trees to beautify the grounds. They have even volunteered alongside city health officials to try to halt a rat problem by putting out bait.

Crane says the intense level of involvement and communication enhances parent-teacher relationships and, in turn, both the formal and informal conferences that take place. So when it's time for formal parent-teacher conference nights three times a year, Crane says, "I can't handle the crowds."

As a result, when there are difficult conversations to have—and there are plenty in a school in which one-third of students attend summer school in order to be promoted—parents feel they are on the same team with the school.

"I feel so much confidence in the principal, I come and ask her, 'What can I do?'" says Beverly Ellis, a mother of five and Ford School parent for 22 years. Ellis, who has two children at the school now, recently had to speak with teachers when her daughter started throwing erasers in her sixth-grade class. "I like to hear they are doing good. But if things are not going right, you can talk to the teachers."

These conferences are sensitive to parents' needs. They are folded into family evenings that include displays of student work (no babysitters needed, and kids can show off learning). There is food. There are translators. The conferences are never held in the winter (easier for families with babies). Last year, Crane even held a conference in the street because a father with health problems couldn't easily get out of his car.

The formula appears to have worked. Crane, whose school has an attendance rate of 95.5 percent, had 92 percent of families come to an open house in November 2006 and attend parent-teacher conferences later that same night.

Other schools focus on welcoming parents during the school day. At Harriet Gibbons High School in Albany, New York, a new school serving ninth graders in a community in which 40 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-priced lunches, principal Anthony Clement built parent-teacher conference time into the daily school schedule. Team A teachers are available from 12:40 p.m. to 1:40 p.m., and Team B teachers are available from 10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. If parents are not free during the conference hour, teachers will meet at other times, or—as in the case of the mother of a child in math teacher George Benson's class who must pack up three young kids and take two city buses to attend a conference—plan regular phone calls. School social workers will even make home visits. Noting that many of his parents work at jobs with hourly wages, Clement says, "We know when a parent is here, we need to see them."

As a result, Clement says, 80 percent of parents have attended one or two daytime parent-teacher conferences *in addition* to the two districtwide conferences held on two school days in November and January. Clement credits the emphasis on conferencing with increasing school attendance from 63 percent last year to 85 percent this year, more parent involvement in school activities, and a dramatic up-tick in ninth graders earning five or more of the required credits for promotion to tenth grade, from 45 percent last year to almost 70 percent this year.

The school's approach has also helped parents like Agnes Jackson get involved in her middle son's education. Where Jackson has yet to attend a conference at her third grader's school, she sat down more than a dozen times with her ninth-grade son's teachers at Harriet Gibbons—and that doesn't count scores of informal conversations about her son's school progress.

The frequent conferences have given Jackson a better handle on how the school system works and what is expected of her children. "In the past, I was quick to say, 'These people are doing this to my child,'" she says. "Now I ask, 'But what is my child doing that causes this to happen?' I can hear good and bad. But it's all good because I know how to respond to help my child. It helps me to say, 'OK, bud, you've got to do this,'" says Jackson. "It's helped me to grow as a single parent."

The easy access to teachers at Harriet Gibbons has also colored her views about her son's schools. Her third grader's school, she says, "will call if there is a problem," whereas the constant conversation with her ninth grader's teachers has made her more of a partner. "They tell me about his potential; they tell me what he is capable of doing," she says.

Laura Pappano writes about education and is coauthor, with Eileen McDonagh, of Playing with the Boys: Why Separate Is Not Equal in Sports, published by Oxford University Press.



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For Further Information

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A.T. Henderson, K. L. Mapp, V.R. Johnson, and D. Davies. *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*. New York: New Press, 2007.

K.V. Hoover-Dempsey and J.M.T. Walker. "Family-School Communication." Paper prepared for Research Committee of the Metropolitan Nashville/Davidson County Board of Public Education, March 2002. Available online in pdf format, [click here](#).

S. Lawrence-Lightfoot. *The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other*. New York: Random House, 2003.