Student-Led Parent Conferences in Middle Schools

Cheri Tuinstra and Diana Hiatt-Michael

Abstract

This study examined the development and effects of school-wide student-led conferencing (SLC) at four middle schools across four states, namely California, Oregon, Texas, and Washington. All site administrators, 30 teachers, and 524 middle school students and their parents in 30 classrooms participated in this study. Methodology included student and parent surveys, teacher and site administrator interviews, and extensive on-site observations. Findings revealed positive effects of SLC at each site and suggest a ten-step process to implement SLC at a school site.

Key words: student-led conferences, middle school, educational reform, parent involvement, student engagement

Introduction

Student-Led Parent Conferences

This study focuses on the benefits and challenges of implementing student-led parent conferences in middle schools. The entire process of student-led parent conferences (SLC), culminating in the conference itself, constitutes an innovative school structure which may enable students to take charge of their

education (Loebus, 1999). The process of SLC includes student assessment of what he/she knows, setting goals to move forward, developing strategies to reach those goals, and producing work products or performances indicating movement toward reaching the goals (Bailey & Guskey, 2001; Benson & Barnett, 1999). The culminating conference provides students the opportunity to demonstrate to parents and to the broader school community their academic mastery through performance or product. Sizer (1992) and Darling-Hammond (1997), among others, support student exhibitions and presentations as means by which students represent school goals and standards, and by which they demonstrate mastery.

Background

In *My Pedagogic Creed,* Dewey (1897) speaks of the need for the child to take responsibility for his/her education. He states, "To prepare [the child] for the future life means to give him command of himself" (¶ 6). In an effort to help students accept responsibility for their education, states have legislated benchmark and achievement tests. While such tests can foster external control of education, a true acceptance of responsibility for one's education and a motivation to meet and exceed the state-developed standards must come from within. Sizer (1999) speaks to the concept of "grappling" with information as a way of transforming facts into knowledge. He notes the following:

> [Grappling] presumes that the student has something to add to the story…The information students collect can be scrutinized carefully by their classmates, their teacher, and outside groups, both for the way it was gathered and for what it means. (p. 25)

Tyler (1976) cited serious problems associated with conducting public education according to a rigid, delivery-style format. He stated:

> What I remember from experiences as a pupil are the strictness of discipline, the catechismic type of recitation, the dullness of the textbooks, and the complete absence of any obvious connection between our class work and the activities we carried on outside of school. (p. 26)

He noted how schools accepted this inflexible design for years without scrutiny. The result has been to "perceive school learning as primarily depending upon the presumed ability of the student rather than upon the relevance and effectiveness of the learning experiences" (p. 21). Consequently, "inadequate educational achievement is ascribed to the low abilities of the children rather than to the probable inadequacy of the learning conditions provided" (p. 21).

Statement of the Problem

Currently, most schools use a parent-teacher conference structure as a communication tool between the school and home (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). In the traditional parent-teacher conference, the teacher, usually in the child's absence, tells the parent about the student's work. The child is seldom part of the conversation in the traditional conference structure and is given little if any opportunity by the school in any venue to discuss his/her academic work with his/her parents. While parent participation in parent-teacher conferences is often high for students in the early grades, it dramatically decreases for students in middle and high school grades (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). By the time the child reaches middle school, there is often little parent participation in the child's academic life and few school structures in place that encourage the child to take responsibility for his/her own learning. Consequently, the necessity for being responsible academically may completely escape the child.

Importance of the Study

One promising approach to helping students become more academically responsible is the student-led parent conference process. The problem is that very little research exists currently on the advantages and disadvantages of the SLC process. Consequently, we know little about the nature of the SLC process and its effect on student academic responsibility.

Middle school is pivotal for most students. It is a time of significant bodily changes, intense curiosity, desired independence, and pitfalls that can affect the individual for the rest of his/her life if poor choices are made during these years (Anderson & Martin, 1987). Research indicates that to help middle school students develop into academically astute, responsible adults, education in the middle grades must include the following aspects: (a) learning as constructed, (b) learning as self-regulated, (c) learning as contextual, and (d) learning as social (Louis, 2000, p. 122). Louis notes that these aspects of learning must be present in order for middle school students to own the learning. While most educators may see these aspects as important, they are not frequently implemented in schools. The SLC process provides a structure by which students can implement all four aspects of the learning model proposed by Louis.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the benefits and drawbacks of the student-led parent conference (SLC) process and to measure its effectiveness in

increasing middle school students' academic responsibility and learning. The study explored the potential of SLC to change the way local schools and individual teachers conduct school-home conferences/conversations. In addition, the study examined factors embedded in preparation for and implementation of SLC.

Methods

Design

The specific design of the study was a utilization-focused, mixed methods program evaluation. Data were collected through survey and interview instruments used with students, parents, and staff at each school. Archival data were also gathered. The study was organized to address eight categories of questions that were raised from the survey of literature and related research (see the Appendix for these questions). All site administrators and 30 teachers participated in focused and open-ended interviews. In addition, one of the researchers observed student-led conferences. Student and parent survey responses were calculated in percentages. Interview responses were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively to identify themes. Data were analyzed by school and also aggregated across the four schools.

Participants

Criteria for the selection of the schools were the following:
 (a) The school was classified as a middle school by the district;
 (b) The school is utilizing SLC school-wide;
 (c) The school has been using SLC for at least 2 years;
 (d) The school included students from diverse ethnic groups; and
 (e) The SLC conferences occurred after June 2001 and before January 2002.

Only 4 middle schools met these criteria, identified through an online search plus additional personal networking, and all agreed to participate in the study. These schools are located in the states of California, Oregon, Texas, and Washington. These schools will be identified by their state names in the remainder of this article.

The Texas school was initially selected to serve as a pilot study because this school had SLC during a summer session. However, no methods were revised based upon the pilot study, so this school was also included in the full study.

The student sample varied from school to school based upon grade levels and ethnic diversity. The Oregon sample included students in grades 6-8 because the school organized students in multi-age classes. The Texas school program was also grades 6-8. The California and Washington schools had student populations over 600 each. The student-led conferences are conducted within 2 days, and the study utilized only 2 trained data gatherers. Because of these factors and to assure accurate data collection, data was gathered on only 7th graders and their parents at these 2 schools. The Texas and California schools contained more students who reported that they were Hispanic than Washington and Oregon.

Of the 67 credentialed faculty across all 4 schools whose students participated in the survey, 30 were randomly selected. These faculty members responded to both the survey and interviews. All 7 site administrators participated in long and sometimes iterative interviews. The combined faculty and administrators were 92.3% White and 7.8% Hispanic. More than two-thirds of the respondents were female, and slightly less than one-third, male. No subject holds a doctoral degree; however, more than three-fourths hold masters degrees.

Table 1. Number in the Total School Population and Respondents by School

Students	Number by School				
	California	Oregon	Texas	Washington	Sum
School Student Population	996	630	43	652	2321
Student Study Sample *n*	328	630	43	211	1212
Responding Students	155	284	22	63	524
Responding Parents/other	155	284	21	63	523

Staff	California	Oregon	Texas	Washington	Sum
Teacher Population	44.5	35	6	28	113.5
Staff Study Sample *n*	14	35	6	12	67
Responding Administration	2	2	1	2	7
Responding Staff	6	11	6	7	30

Additional student subject demographics include the child's ethnicity, gender, grade level, age, birth order in the family, and school mobility. Approximately two-thirds of all student subjects are in seventh grade, and the average age is 12 years. Of all student subjects, 44% are the firstborn in the family. Of student respondents, 50% entered the district in kindergarten; 95% entered the middle school at sixth grade. Table 2 delineates student subject demographic information.

Table 2. Ethnicity of Student Sample by School

Ethnicity	California	Oregon	Texas	Washington	Average %
African-American	2%	3%	0%	2%	1.8%
Asian	7%	1%	0%	3%	2.8%
Hispanic	52%	9%	76%	5%	35.5%
White	24%	81%	24%	81%	52.5%
Other	15%	7%	0%	10%	8.0%

Nearly 80% of the conferencing adults are the student's natural mother. All but approximately 5% of the conferencing adults are over 30 years of age. Slightly more than one-third of adult subjects list their ethnicity as Hispanic; over half list their ethnicity as White.

Findings

All schools participating in the study had implemented other educational reform practices that included class size under 30, teams of teachers, and block scheduling. Therefore, some of the findings from the student surveys may reflect student perceptions of these reforms as well as SLC. All schools had strong administrators willing to think outside the box, read educational research, and take calculated risks by trying new methods in education. Key findings of this study are reported in four categories: school site administrators, teachers, students, and parents.

School Site Administrators

Findings reported by school site administrators are summarized as follows:
1. All schools made the change to SLC in an attempt to attain increased student responsibility for academic work and promote higher academic success.
2. All schools reported multiple educational reforms that included classes less than 30, teams of teachers, and block schedules.
3. All schools see staff development as crucial to implementing successful SLC. (Refer to Recommendations for Implementing a SLC Program, Steps 1-3.)
4. All schools continually stress quality work. (Refer to Recommendations for Implementing a SLC Program, Steps 4-7.)
5. All schools reported higher scores on state tests in reading and math since implementing SLC.
6. All schools have received state recognition for excellence in education. (Refer to Recommendations for Implementing a SLC Program, Step 10.)
7. All four schools reported a significant decline in discipline problems since implementing SLC.

Teachers

Findings related to teachers are summarized as follows:

1. All teachers reported the importance of the "team" in preparing for and continually improving SLC. (Refer to Recommendations for Implementing a SLC Program, Step 3.)
2. All teachers reported they plan lessons with more intent since implementing SLC. (Refer to Recommendations for Implementing a SLC program, Step 6.)
3. All teachers reported less stress during SLC than during prior parent-teacher conferences.
4. No teacher voiced a desire to return to the traditional parent-teacher conference format.

Parents

Findings related to parents are summarized as follows:

1. Over 95% of the parents indicated they are proud of their child taking the lead in the conferences. (Refer to Recommendations for Implementing a SLC Program, Steps 8-9.)
2. Parent participation in conferences has increased significantly to a minimum of 92% participation at all four schools
3. Parent responses indicated that 84% to 99% wish to continue participating in SLC, and 73% to 95% feel their child is more successful academically since participating in SLC.

Students

Findings related to students are summarized as follows:

1. Over 94% reported they revise and edit their work, with 58% of the students indicating they have always done this, and 36% indicating they do this because they participate in SLC.
2. Over 90% of students reported setting goals for their work; of these, 49% indicated they have always done this, and 43% indicated they do this because they participate in SLC.
3. Over 86% indicated they feel their work is better because they spend more time on it, with 49% of the students indicating they almost always do this, and 37% indicating they usually do this because they participate in SLC.
4. Over 76% indicated they are better students because they set goals, with 40% indicating they almost always do this, and 36% indicating they usually do this.
5. Teachers reported that student work is more focused and that students have been more academically successful since the school began implementing SLC. (Refer to Recommendations for Implementing a SLC Program, Step 6.)

Student responses are detailed in Tables 3 and 4.

Two areas of SLC still present challenges: (a) streamlining paperwork, and (b) finding adequate SLC preparation time. All schools indicated these are issues for which there are no easy solutions.

Table 3: Percentage of Student Subjects Engaged in Various Activities Since Participating in SLC by School

School and degree	I set goals for my work	I revise & edit work	I work with other students on projects	I share ideas	I make sure work is done on time	I select work for my portfolio	I review work, prepare to discuss it with my parents
California							
Have Always	45%	48%	58%	61%	72%	42%	41%
Now	48%	47%	33%	30%	26%	55%	46%
Never	7%	5%	8%	9%	1%	3%	13%
Oregon							
Have Always	45%	59%	74%	65%	51%	64%	56%
Now	49%	36%	22%	21%	47%	32%	39%
Never	6%	5%	4%	14%	2%	4%	5%
Texas							
Have Always	43%	52%	81%	76%	33%	48%	33%
Now	38%	33%	14%	19%	67%	43%	52%
Never	19%	14%	5%	5%	0%	10%	14%
Washington							
Have Always	61%	73%	73%	67%	73%	43%	33%
Now	35%	27%	27%	27%	27%	54%	46%
Never	3%	0%	0%	6%	0%	3%	21%
Aggregate							
Have Always	49%	58%	72%	67%	57%	49%	41%
Now	43%	36%	24%	24%	42%	46%	46%
Never	9%	6%	4%	9%	1%	5%	13%

Table 4: Student Subject Affect Since Participating in SLC by Percentage and School

School and degree	I like being at school	I feel I am a better student b/c I set goals	I feel my work is better b/c I participate in SLC	I feel work is better b/c I spend more time on it	I feel work is better b/c I reflect on it	I feel work is better b/c I review and edit it	I feel I understand the work we do in the classroom	I like school better since participating in SLC	I feel the adults at my school help me be successful	I feel pride in sharing my work with my parents
California										
Almost Always	34%	35%	32%	44%	32%	41%	50%	21%	59%	45%
Usually	39%	41%	39%	37%	48%	37%	43%	35%	27%	35%
Sometimes	20%	23%	19%	18%	19%	21%	7%	30%	12%	15%
Almost Never	6%	1%	9%	1%	1%	1%	0%	14%	2%	5%
Oregon										
Almost Always	46%	34%	38%	45%	32%	41%	47%	25%	56%	58%
Usually	32%	37%	34%	36%	38%	37%	40%	33%	29%	25%
Sometimes	16%	22%	20%	18%	26%	17%	12%	29%	12%	13%
Almost Never	7%	7%	8%	2%	5%	4%	1%	13%	3%	4%
Texas										
Almost Always	19%	48%	38%	57%	24%	38%	62%	19%	71%	62%
Usually	38%	29%	48%	38%	48%	43%	33%	38%	24%	29%
Sometimes	29%	19%	10%	5%	29%	19%	5%	33%	5%	10%
Almost Never	14%	5%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	10%	0%	0%
Washington										
Almost Always	51%	42%	40%	50%	37%	63%	57%	27%	65%	47%
Usually	30%	37%	25%	37%	43%	27%	33%	30%	22%	33%
Sometimes	12%	17%	30%	12%	18%	10%	10%	28%	13%	17%
Almost Never	7%	5%	5%	2%	2%	0%	0%	15%	0%	3%
Aggregate										
Almost Always	38%	40%	37%	49%	31%	46%	54%	23%	63%	53%
Usually	35%	36%	37%	37%	44%	36%	37%	34%	26%	31%
Sometimes	19%	20%	20%	13%	23%	17%	9%	30%	11%	14%
Almost Never	9%	5%	7%	1%	2%	1%	0%	13%	1%	3%

Discussion

Implementation

Implementation of student-led parent conferences requires school willingness to make structural changes along with other school reforms and the continuous support of a strong administrator. Analysis of the data indicates that all schools made the change to SLC in an attempt to attain increased student responsibility for academic work and to promote higher academic success. During interviews, administrators and staff from all schools reported using multiple educational reforms including small classes, teams of teachers, and block schedules. Therefore, SLC is one of four educational reform practices in place at all the schools in this study.

Each administrator in the study demonstrated support for SLC through released time for educators, provision of resources, and flexible conference scheduling. Administrators, moreover, reported they encouraged and supported their staff to present SLC workshops at interested schools and at conferences. Administrators also reported opening their doors to visitors from other schools interested in SLC. In interviews, staff at all schools indicated that the quality of the academic programs and the state recognition of each school was due in large part to the support of a strong administrator. One administrator herself noted the importance of strong administrative support by stating, "Administrative support and a vision of how things should go are critical." These findings are well supported by literature on leadership and school reform. Fullan (1999) notes that "consolidation, reflection, celebration and the capacity to push even deeper in a further spiral of reform activity" occurs when strong leaders recognize and act on the need for change (p. 34).

All administrators also implemented principles for empowering people, including: (a) setting standards of excellence, (b) providing training that will enable them to meet the standards, (c) recognizing them for their achievements, and (d) treating them with dignity and respect (Dessler, 1999, p. 303). In providing a support system for teachers as they risked a new venture in implementing SLC, teachers not only bought into the idea of SLC, they took ownership of it. This is what Senge (2000) defines as becoming a servant to the vision one has chosen, becoming "a partner in the process of making it come to life" (p. 65).

Structural changes must of necessity take place in schools implementing SLC. These include creating and storing portfolios, inviting parents to participate in SLC, and providing opportunity for the student and parents to conference together regarding the student's academic work.

Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) discuss three school structures that support the awareness and development of metacognition and assessment, elements of SLC. These structures—learner-centered, knowledge-centered, and assessment-centered environments—were present at all four schools in the study. Each school made a concerted effort to provide continuous and effective learning and evaluation opportunities for all students. Students built on the knowledge and skills they brought to the educational setting, and learned to evaluate and assess their own work and that of their peers.

The literature supports the implementation of multiple reform measures in today's schools. We know from various studies that restructuring efforts are imperative in providing the learner-centered, knowledge-centered, and assessment-centered environments in which students can flourish. Meier (1992) sees the need for creating different systems/structures in schools, because different outcomes must be accomplished in education today. She points out the necessity of developing new habits to accompany new cognitive understanding, which is clearly the intent of school reforms already in place at the schools in this study. These reforms include block schedules, smaller class size, teaming, students staying with a cadre of teachers throughout their middle school years, and programs designed to meet the needs of all students (those at risk, as well as high achievers). When sound reform measures are in place, the school exponentially increases the likelihood of student academic success. Darling-Hammond (1997) and Meier cited numerous schools with high numbers of students participating in national free and reduced lunch programs and high numbers identified for special education services that have implemented school reforms and have seen incredible student success.

Senge (2000) too stresses the importance of structures that support learning. He notes, "A learning classroom requires methods and infrastructure that make it possible for everyone to foster one another's success deliberately…In such a class, students recognize that part of their purpose is making sure that everyone succeeds" (p. 104).

Staff Development

Staff development is key to implementing successful student-led parent conferences. Administrators at all four schools emphasized the importance of staff development in successful SLC. They provided time and funding for staff to attend workshops, to mentor new teachers, provide in-services, and present at state and national conferences. All teachers interviewed also indicated that staff development and teamwork were vital to the success of SLC.

In discussing staff development, Goodlad (1975) stresses the importance of a "compelling, different drummer whose drumbeat somehow is picked up by the school's antenna" (p. 178). Once the school is aware of the beat, the beat and the music must be orchestrated into a beautiful, harmonious song, via the hard work of staff training.

Staff development today must be done in light of "building capacity," a term connoting that the new structures will be rooted in the organization and will not disappear when an individual leaves or when the budget is reduced. Senge (2000) notes that people only sustain interest if they choose to make a commitment on their own, through a nudge here, an inspiration there, and the provision of a role model (p. 273). Again, the importance of strong school leaders is imperative.

Additional literature supports the importance of staff development as a catalyst for change. We also know from Senge (2000) that people need opportunity to change the ways they think and interact if organizations are to change for the better. Meier (1992) builds on Senge's mental models in stressing the necessity of changing how teachers view teaching and learning. Fullan (1993) supports change by outlining basic change lessons. The researcher's observations at the school sites, as well as the interviews of staff and administrators, indicated that many of these lessons are in effect at the four schools. Staff and administrators spoke of continuous reflection on the conferences, the preparation of students, the intent of direct instruction, the selection of work samples, and the execution of the conference itself. Senge and Fullan both stress the importance of reflection and collegial interaction in building a shared vision. Teaming, in place at each of the four schools, is one structure that enables staff to come together on a regular basis and reflect on SLC. It was evident that the focus at all four schools was not on particular practices, but on building collaborative relationships and structures for change, what Senge terms "systems thinking" (p. 393). This was the foundation of staff development.

Student Initiative and Responsibility

Student-led parent conferences afford students the opportunity to take the lead in all dimensions of SLC, provide an impetus for students to produce quality work, and help decrease discipline problems. Several students commented they were taking responsibility for their academic work: "I do more things better; I put more effort into them;" "I get straight A's. I didn't get them in elementary school;" and "I love conferences. I like being in charge." Administrators indicated they believe the decline in discipline problems is related to both the emphasis on student ownership of work and the emphasis of quality

work. Comments by administrators included: "Kids know they are responsible for their work and are expected to do quality work. Discipline problems have really fallen off;" "There is a raised level of concern on the part of the students because they need to share their work;" and "Kids realize their behavior impacts their learning."

Research indicates that misbehavior occurs when students are required to learn in a context devoid of emotional ties. Doing authentic work, creating portfolios, and preparing to dialogue with his/her parents about school work links the student's work to an emotional relationship, and thereby helps reduce discipline problems. Limited findings on the results of SLC at various middle schools suggest multiple positive outcomes for students. Epstein (1995) found that when a child has a support network, not only does the child feel secure and cared for, but also works to achieve his/her full potential, builds positive attitudes and school behaviors, and stays in school. Thereby, likelihood of student success is increased.

Literature also indicates that the student must be the key player in all dimensions of SLC. In preparation for SLC, the student assesses his/her skills, sets goals, monitors his/her work, and collects evidence of academic progress. During observation of conferences, the researcher witnessed students animatedly discussing schoolwork with parents. As the students reevaluated their goals following the conference, they challenged themselves to set higher goals and meet greater challenges. Throughout the conference process, the researchers observed that students had indeed taken charge of their education. The roles and responsibilities of participants are further discussed by Bailey and Guskey (2001).

Each school in the study created an environment in which the student could, in fact, take control of his/her education, an environment with a pattern of organization which Schlechty calls "opportunity structures" (1990, p. 32). Opportunity structures provide students the opportunity to become independent life-long learners, able to thrive in an information-based global society. Administrators and staff at all schools reported providing learning opportunities for students in the form of projects rather than worksheets, providing assessment opportunities in which students could assess their own work and their state test scores, and providing guidance in writing appropriate goals based on assessment. In addition, all staff reported they trained students to reflect on their work in a way that enabled students to improve the quality of their work. All administrators reported that the reflection piece was a critical element in the process of preparing students for SLC. The convergence of these elements creates what Senge (2000) refers to as a "double-loop," an extension of the causal loop. In the double-loop, one reflects on the causes and effects of

the causal loop. Senge also notes the importance of the reflective part of the cycle. He states, "observing and reflecting are the most crucial parts of the cycle" (p. 98). Reflection helps students understand why an activity is important, and why they are engaging in the activity. Therefore, reflection helps students justify their work and plot a sound course of action.

Environment and Communication

Student-led parent conferences create an ambience in which positive attitudes flourish, thereby enhancing communication across all stakeholders, diffusing parent-teacher conflicts, and helping to foster a caring community. Findings indicate that since participating in SLC, teachers feel less stress during conferences. Teachers commented, "[SLC are] a step in a positive direction," and "There is a lot of work in preparation, but the days of the conferences, there is little stress for teachers." Another remarked, "All schools should implement [SLC]. I wish I could have done SLC right from the beginning of my career. I would have felt a lot more positive about teaching…Now I'm enjoying myself. These are big things that kids are doing." This final statement referred to students assessing their work, reflecting on that work, and setting goals to challenge themselves.

The importance of a positive school environment is supported by the statements of students in interviews: "I feel much more successful [at school];" "I need to work more, but I feel good about my work;" and "I feel more successful and more mature." Fifty-four percent of subjects surveyed indicated they feel they almost always understand the work done in the classroom; 37% usually understand. Sixty-three percent indicated they feel the adults at their school almost always helped them be successful; 26% indicated "usually." These positive attitudes help support a positive school climate.

Parents demonstrated their support of SLC by their presence at conferences, with parent participation never falling below 92% at any of the four schools. Parents also expressed the belief that their child is more successful academically since having participated in SLC. Over 95% of parents indicated they were proud of their child taking the lead in the conferences; over 84% indicated they wish to continue participating in SLC.

Based on literature and this study, the researchers deduce that the overall benefit of student-led conferences is that they build and nurture a caring community while supporting a strong academic program. Each of the findings supports this belief. Without strong, caring administrators and staff, appropriate SLC training and preparation would not take place. Without caring parents and community members, conferences themselves would be unproductive.

Without caring students, quality work and dialogue would be nonexistent. When the family, school, and community come together in a caring way, a strong academic program can blossom and flourish (Epstein, 2001).

SLC creates an ambience in which positive attitudes flourish. Both students and parents strongly indicated their positive feelings about SLC. Such positive experiences for both parents and students help keep the school-family partnership strong. As noted in the literature review, Epstein sees the ideal structure of school, family, and community as strong overlapping spheres, in which the student him/herself is crucial in making the school/parent/community partnerships work successfully (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997). A position statement of the Connecticut State Board of Education on School-Family-Community Partnerships takes this one step further, stating that schools must take the lead in developing and sustaining effective partnerships (cited in Epstein, 2001, p. 317). Schools can indeed take that lead by implementing SLC.

Student-led conferences enhance communication across all stakeholders. The work of Meier (1992), Epstein (1995; 2001), and Kushman (1997)corroborates the importance of school-home communication for student success. The International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English confirm the importance of that communication in their standards for the assessment of reading and writing. Both organizations believe that parents play a vital part in the learning process. At each of the four schools, student-led parent conferences provide the prime forum in which school-home communication takes place. This forum also becomes a context within which the child fits new meaning into an existing frame of reference, and within which caring adults assign value to the child's contributions to the community. It becomes a time when various members of the child's community come together to listen and learn and strengthen their bond. Stiggins (1999) notes the following about the relationship of SLC and communication:

> Student-involved communication brings students into the process of sharing information with others about their success. One way to do this is through the use of student-led parent conferences. I believe that this practice is the biggest breakthrough in communicating about student achievement in the last century. (p. 196)

Student-led conferences appear to diffuse parent-teacher conflicts. When the child takes responsibility for his/her own work and presents that work to parents in a conference, it frees the teacher from having to explain the child's work and the corresponding grades. In the SLC format, the teacher becomes the advocate for the child, one who applauds the student's success and provides

a support network for his/her climb to success. This format results in more positive parent-teacher interaction.

Last but not least, student-led conferences help foster a caring community. The more interplay there is between schools and families, the greater the variety of communication between and among those involved. As the participants recognize their shared responsibilities for and interest in children, caring communities develop and grow (Epstein, 1995). As circles of relationships multiply, the community expands, and a larger network of support for student learning results (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 145).

Each of the findings is, of necessity, intertwined with the others. Overlap is evident throughout the discussion of the findings. None of the elements of SLC can exist in a vacuum. Community traverses all findings, as does student success, student engagement with learning, administrative support, and parent participation. SLC encompasses every dimension of a student's school career.

Recommendations for Implementing a SLC Program

This research revealed several positive academic effects of student-led conferences for students, parents, and teachers. Because SLC can be implemented in a school at little cost and in a relatively short amount of time, it is recommended that this approach be used in any school that seeks to increase student achievement and parent involvement. The cost of staff development is minimal, also. A school can contract with an educational consultant to provide staff training for SLC, or a school can invite teachers from a school already using SLC to give workshops for an even smaller fee. Time for training can begin with as little as a few hours on a given day, or as much as several full days for staff development and visits to schools already using SLC. While costs will vary based on the size and location of the school, these costs, compared to those of purchasing commercial programs for thousands of dollars, make the implementation of SLC possible even for schools on extremely limited budgets.

In addition, the findings suggested several steps to effective implementation of this school reform. The steps follow the suggested order, but a school should tailor the reform process to its existing procedures and policies.

Step 1. It is recommended that the administrator and a team of stakeholders read the literature on SLC. The basis of any reform implementation is a strong commitment by the school administrator and a school culture's willingness to make structural changes necessary with any new school reform. Fullan (1993) notes the complexity of the change process and its unwieldy nature. The administrator, then, as the lead change agent, must possess new skills, behavior, and beliefs or understanding (p. 22). Fullan also stresses the importance of

inquiry in order to understand the intricate problems associated with change. Brandt supports the value of collecting and analyzing data, and of gathering, processing, and acting upon information before instituting change.

Step 2. It is recommended that the administrator and a team of stakeholders visit schools already using SLC to determine how the administrator can best support the school in SLC implementation. Schools wishing to consider implementing SLC should visit at least two schools already using these conferences successfully.

Fullan (2000) stresses the importance of forging links to new ideas and to new practices as a critical step in altering the way people work together (1993). Senge asserts that an on-site visit allows a prospective school to see a new idea in action, enlarges the conversation about the new idea, and builds collaborative relationships to enact the reform.

Step 3. It is recommended that the administrator contract with an educational consultant well-versed in SLC for a minimum of 2 to 3 days of staff development. As part of this staff development, schools wishing to consider implementing SLC should visit a school implementing SLC with a student population similar to that of their school. Darling-Hammond (1997) and Meier (1992) encourage teacher visitation as a critical element to implement school reform. In addition, at least two in-service days should be planned during the school year, after teachers have prepared for and conducted one SLC. This will allow time to interact with a presenter and to organize the paperwork necessary for successful SLC preparation. Implementing change takes time. Wade (as cited in Brandt, 1998) suggests that an organization does not suddenly arrive at its destination, but must develop over time. Periodic staff development will enable the school to build capacity for SLC within itself.

Step 4. It is recommended that teachers weave into the curriculum learning opportunities in which students can take a role of responsibility. These will help build the individual student's confidence as the leader. The Teaching for Understanding project, supported by the Howard Gardner School of Education at Harvard University, focuses on three key concepts: (a) generative topics, (b) understanding goals, and (c) ongoing assessment. With a mastery of these concepts, students can apply their knowledge and skills flexibly in a variety of situations (Gardner & Perkins, 2002, p. 1). Meier (1992) supports student presentation of work to the broader community, as does Louis (2000).

Step 5. It is recommended that students participate in a values inventory to gain a clearer understanding of what motivates them. This inventory assesses the importance that a student places on each value (Mura, 1990). Understanding what motivates the student can be valuable information in helping himself/herself navigate the river of academia. Student-led parent conferences

create an ambience in which positive attitudes flourish, thereby enhancing communication across all stakeholders, diffusing parent-teacher conflicts, and helping to foster a caring community.

Step 6. It is recommended that teachers help students learn how to set goals for their academic work based on their assessment of and reflection on their work. This recommendation is supported by Bailey and Guskey (2001) and by Sternberg (2000). Sternberg states that "students need to learn to critique their own ideas" (p. 61), to practice analyzing and reflecting on their own.

Step 7. It is recommended that teachers explain and post their work expectations in the classroom. It is also recommended that teachers use rubrics and matrices in evaluating student work, and then teach students how to use these tools to evaluate their own work and that of their peers. Rubrics provide an objective measurement for student work. Arter and McTighe (2001) support rubrics and performance criteria as "powerful instructional tools for improving the very achievement that is also being assessed" (p. 82).

Step 8. It is recommended that parent workshops are developed to prepare parents to participate effectively in SLC. The more prepared all participants are, the more effective the conferences will be. It is also suggested that parent workshops be held each year both for review and for new parent orientation. The school must take the lead in developing and sustaining strong family-school partnerships (Epstein, 2001). Regular parent workshops are one means by which these partnerships can be nurtured.

Step 9. It is recommended that the student be given the responsibility of formally introducing his/her parents to the teacher before the student-led conference commences. Learning social etiquette helps students gain greater social competence. Social competence helps build a positive classroom community, a finding of the Child Development Project (Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1996).

Step 10. It is recommended that teachers and administrators invite the broader community to celebrate student academic achievement. This can be accomplished by holding a student achievement celebration week near the end of the school year and by holding student exit interviews for students in their final year of middle school. An exit interview provides students a forum in which to demonstrate that they have the skills and knowledge necessary to inaugurate a successful high school journey.

Recommendations for Future Research

Because this is a baseline study, it is recommended that additional research build on the findings of this study. First, the researchers recommend a longitudinal study of students that use SLC in middle schools. The study would

follow middle school students into their high school years, and it would take into consideration multiple measures of academic achievement by students during their middle school and high school years. The purpose for such research would be to determine two things: (a) which students or groups of students benefit most from having used SLC in middle school, and (b) to what extent students continue to use the various components of SLC during their high school years, even though the high school itself may not use SLC. Findings from such a study could help teachers understand how to modify SLC to make its implementation even more academically beneficial for middle school students. Findings may also be a stimulus for SLC implementation in high schools.

Second, a study should be conducted at school sites where SLC is the sole reform. The purpose of this study would be to determine if, and the degree to which, SLC as a sole school reform impacts academic achievement.

Third, a comparison study should be conducted on parent training versus no parent training in preparation for SLC. The purpose of this study would be to determine if parents participate more effectively in SLC when they themselves receive training prior to SLC.

Fourth, a comparison study should be conducted on the relationship of SLC to eighth grade exit interviews. An exit interview is one conducted by the student before a panel of community members to demonstrate that he/she has made positive contributions to both the school community and the community at large, and is ready to matriculate.

Fifth, a comparison study should be conducted on how various aspects of the SLC process are taught and implemented at different middle schools. These processes include students assessing their own work, setting goals, writing strategies to achieve goals, writing reflective pieces on completed work and work in progress, and on conducting the conference itself.

Concluding Remarks

Results of this study suggest that implementing student-led conferences is a relatively easy and cost-effective undertaking and holds the potential for far-reaching positive effects for students and the entire school community. It is the expectation of the researchers that the results of this study may be beneficial in helping create learning environments in which students may warmly embrace their education and joyfully share their academic success with a caring community.

Appendix
Eight Categories of Research Questions
Category 1: Reasons for changing from parent-teacher conferences to student-led parent conferences.
  Question 1.1: What was the sequence of events leading to student conferences?
  Question 1.2: What site or district decisions were made to implement student conferences?
  Question 1.3: When were student conferences first implemented at the site?
  Question 1.4: As a result of implementing student-led conferences, what is happening that was not expected?
Category 2: Structural Changes
  Question 2.1: What structural changes did the teacher make to prepare students to lead parent conferences?
  Question 2.2: What additional structural changes do the teacher and students deem necessary in order to better prepare for student-led conferences?
Category 3: Academic Changes
  Question 3.1: Academically, what do students do now that they did not do before implementing student-led parent conferences?
  Question 3.2: How have students taken responsibility for their own learning?
  Question 3.3: How has student achievement changed because of student-led parent conferences?
Category 4: Observable Classroom Behavior Changes
  Question 4.1: Has student attendance in class improved?
  Question 4.2: In what ways are students participating now that differ from ways they participated prior to the implementation of student-led conferences?
  Question 4.3: What behavior changes have taken place in students?
  Question 4.4: What organizational changes have taken place in the classroom?
Category 5: Students' Affective Domain
  Question 5.1: In what ways do students feel they perform better academically because they formally share their work with parents?
  Question 5.2: How do student-led conferences change student attitudes about school?
  Question 5.3: How much has the quality of student work increased because it is formally shared with parents?
  Question 5.4: How have students demonstrated that the product of their learning is greatly determined by what they personally do?
Category 6: Parent Participation
  Question 6.1: What is the difference between parent participation in conferences before and after implementing student-led conferences?
  Question 6.2: How supportive are parents of student-led conferences?
Category 7: School/District Support
  Question 7.1: What are the school or district policies in place supporting student-led conferences?
  Question 7.2: What school-based action team gives direction and support to the activity?
  Question 7.3: What direction and support does the action team give?
  Question 7.4: What is the budget to support the work and expenses of student-led teacher conferences?
Category 8: Development of Student-led Conferences
  Question 8.1: How long have you used student-led parent conferences?

Question 8.2: What changes have you made to improve conferences since you first imple-
mented them?

Question 8.3: Since you began using these conferences, how many more teachers at the
school site and/or schools within the district have begun using them?

Question 8.4: What opportunities do teachers who use student-led parent conferences have
to share information on successful practices and to strengthen and maintain their efforts?

References

Anderson, G., & Martin, R. (Eds.). (1987). *Caught in the middle: Educational reform for young
adolescents in California public schools.* Sacramento: California Department of Education.

Arter, J., & McTighe, J. (2001). *Scoring rubrics in the classroom: Using performance criteria for
assessing and improving student performance.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Bailey, J., & Guskey, T. (2001). *Implementing student-led conferences.* Thousand Oaks, CA:
Corwin Press.

Benson, B., & Barnett, S. (1999). *Student-led conferencing using showcase portfolios.* Thousand
Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Brandt, R. (1998). *Powerful learning.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and
Curriculum Development.

Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (Eds.). (2000). *How people learn: Brain,
mind, experience, and school.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). *The right to learn: A blueprint for creating schools that work.* San
Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Dessler, G. (1999.) *Essentials of management.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Dewey, J. (1897). *My pedagogic creed.* Retrieved July 1, 2003, from http://www.infed.org/
archives/e-texts/e-dew-pc.htm

Epstein, J. L. (1995). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we
share. *Phi Delta Kappan, 76*(9), 701-712.

Epstein, J. L. (2001). *School, family and community partnerships: Preparing educators and
improving schools.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Epstein, J, Coates, L., Salinas, K., Sanders, M., & Simon, B. (1997). *School, family and
community partnerships: Your handbook for action.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Fullan, M. (1993). *Change forces: Probing the depths of educational reform.* Philadelphia: Falmer
Press.

Fullan, M. (1999). *Change forces: The sequel.* Philadelphia: Falmer Press.

Gardner, H., & Perkins, D. (2002). *Teaching for understanding.* Retrieved February 18,
2002, from Harvard Graduate School of Education, Project Zero Web site: http://
pzweb.harvard.edu/Research/TfU.htm

Goodlad, J. (1975.) *The dynamics of educational change: Toward responsive schools.* New York:
McGraw-Hill.

Hiatt-Michael, D. (2001). Home-school communication. In D. Hiatt-Michael (Ed.), *Promising
practices for family involvement in schools* (pp. 39-57). Greenwich, CT: Information Age
Publishing.

Kushman, J. W. (Ed.). (1997). *Look who's talking now: Student views of learning in restructuring
schools.* Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

Lewis, C., Schaps, E., & Watson, M. (1996). The caring classroom's academic edge.
Educational Leadership, 54, 16-21.

Loebus, C. (1999, June). *Student-led conferences: Students take responsibility for their own learning.* (School Newsletter). Surrey, England: American Community School.

Louis, K. S. (2000). Teachers' professional development for vital middle schools: What do we know and where should we go? In National Educational Research Policy and Priorities Board, *Proceedings of the National Conference on Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment in the Middle Grades: Linking research and practice* (pp. 110-130). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Meier, D. (1992). Reinventing teaching. *Teachers College Record, 93*(4), 594-609.

Mura, A. (1990). *The six motivators.* Available from Transformation Resources, 2405 - 34th Street, Suite 28; Santa Monica, CA 90405.

Schlechty, P. (1990). *Schools for the 21st century: Leadership imperatives for educational reform.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Senge, P. (2000). *Schools that learn.* New York: Doubleday.

Sizer, T. (1992). *Horace's school: Redesigning the American high school.* New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Sizer, T. (1999). *The students are watching: Schools and the moral contract.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Sternberg, R. (2000). Creativity and giftedness: Identifying and developing creative giftedness. *Roeper Review, 23*(2), 60-64.

Stiggins, R. (1999). Assessment, student confidence, and school success. *Phi Delta Kappan, 81*(3), 191-198.

Tyler, R. W. (1976). *Perspectives on American education: Reflections on the past…challenges for the future.* Palo Alto: Science Research Associates.

Cheri Tuinstra is the Principal of the K-5 Program at The Accelerated School in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Diana Hiatt-Michael is a Professor of Education in the Graduation School of Education and Psychology of Pepperdine University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Diana Hiatt-Michael at GSEP, Pepperdine University, 6100 Center Dr., Los Angeles, CA, 90045.