

## Meaningful Parent-Teacher Conferences

(Originally titled “Parent-Teacher Conferences: Outdated or Underutilized?”)\

“For some parents, teacher conferences are more like speed dating than substance,” says Sarah McKibben in this article in *Education Update*. Attendance at these conferences declines steadily as students move through the grades, from 89 percent in primary grades to 57 percent in high school according to one study, and many parents don’t believe they’re worth the trip. McKibben reports on some ideas for improvement:

- *Rebrand*. A more inviting name for these perennial meetings is “progress conferences.” This is more positive and doesn’t seem to exclude foster parents and guardians.
- *Build relationships and trust up front*. Home visits, frequent e-mailing or texting, and partnering around academic issues build the groundwork for face-to-face conferences.
- *Finesse the childcare issue*. “To pay a babysitter to watch your three younger siblings so a parent can attend a conference is not going to happen,” says Ohio high-school teacher Allison Ricket. She invites parents to bring along other children and provides crayons and paper in an area at the back of her classroom where they can entertain themselves during conferences.
- *Accommodate*. Some parents need an interpreter (children shouldn’t be asked to translate) and support with disabilities.
- *Change the dynamic*. It makes a difference if a teacher sits side by side with family members and doesn’t hold a clipboard or pad of paper; open hands suggest an open mind.
- *Clarify learning outcomes*. Surprisingly, only 7 percent of parents in a National Parent Teacher Association survey in K-8 schools said they were informed of grade-level curriculum expectations in conferences. One idea from the Flamboyant Foundation (called Academic Parent-Teacher Teams) is convening parents to talk as a group about curriculum expectations and teaching ideas three times a year, with parents following their children’s individual progress folders. Parents then have a single one-on-one parent conference once a year.
- *Involve students*. Progress conferences are much more helpful when students are at the table reporting on their progress, challenges, and goals. Advisory group meetings focus on preparing students to lead parent conferences and lobby their parents to attend.
- *Listen*. “Parents usually come in having an idea of what they want to talk about, so I like to be open and ready for whatever they need,” says Ricket. Although she has students’ grades and portfolios on hand, she lets parents go first and is careful to empathize with any concerns they have.

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