Student-Led Conferences

Student-led conferences (SLCs) are different from traditional parent-teacher conferences because in this model, students take charge of the discussion with the guidance and support of their teachers. Students prepare for these conferences by reflecting on their strengths, weaknesses, and goals and then use portfolios they have prepared with samples of their work to present evidence of their learning and growth to their parents.6,7

SLCs can help foster student ownership over their own learning and increase student engagement. When students plan and run their own parent-teacher conferences, it allows them to connect their own interests to what they are learning in school and helps foster important 21st century skills, including organization, planning, self-reflection, public speaking, and collaboration.8,9,10

The SLC format can also increase parent participation in parent-teacher conferences and help accommodate parents who do not speak English.11,12

While SLCs are not a new idea, this approach is gaining traction as more schools and districts discover the benefits.13

Student Involvement in School Design, Governance, and Improvement

Schools can involve students more deeply by encouraging student participation on school improvement teams, requiring that students make up a certain percentage of voting members on key committees, or involving students in the design or redesign of their schools.14,15,16

Since 2010, Young Voices, a Rhode Island nonprofit organization, has supported students to have an authentic voice in the redesign of their high schools. In schools, such as Alvarez High School and Juanita Sanchez Educational Complex in Providence, Central Falls High School, and Tolman High School in Pawtucket, youth have conducted surveys and focus groups to obtain youth input on how to improve their schools and then collaborated with school leaders to implement proposed policy changes.17

In 2014, the Carnegie Corporation of New York awarded a $3 million grant to Providence Public Schools to create two new high schools designed by teams comprised of students, educators, and community partners. These two schools, 360 High School and Evolutions, opened in September 2015 and continue to evolve based on the input of students, parents, and teachers. These school models will be replicated elsewhere in Providence if they prove to be successful in terms of increasing high school graduation rates and college and career readiness.18,19
Student Voice in District Reform

In 2014, Nellie Mae Education Foundation awarded a grant to launch the Providence Youth Caucus (PYC), a coalition of youth from across Providence. This coalition is comprised of six youth organizations: the Providence Student Union, Young Voices, New Urban Arts, H2O, the Rhode Island Urban Debate League, and Youth in Action. The PYC provides a forum for youth to work with leaders from the City and state to improve Rhode Island’s biggest school district.20,21

During the 2014 mayoral election, the Providence Youth Caucus held a mayoral forum and presented its student-developed education platform to mayoral candidates for their review and signature.22

Currently, the Providence Youth Caucus focuses on two key areas: (1) improving school culture and disciplinary practices and (2) expanding personalized learning and student ownership.23

Student Involvement in State Governance and Advocacy

In 2014, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed a law that established a Student Advisory Council to the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education, consisting of one elected representative from every public high school in the state. The Student Advisory Council’s purpose is to provide advice from the general student body to the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education. Student Advisory Council members also elect a chairperson to serve as a non-voting member of the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education.24

Rhode Island has several youth organizations that provide training and support to youth interested in state-level advocacy. Organizations have supported youth in developing and delivering testimony to the General Assembly and Council on Elementary and Secondary Education on high school graduation requirements, the use of suspensions, and the state’s education funding formula.25

Students also advocate for state-level change through public actions, media releases, and speeches at high-profile events.26

Recommendations

Consider student-led parent-teacher conferences as an alternative to traditional parent-teacher conferences.

Allow students to provide input and participate in decision-making that affects their individual learning as well as their larger school community.

Actively seek student input when making school-, district-, and state-level decisions that directly impact students and their schools.

Provide funding and other support to help community-based agencies support authentic student voice in school, district, and state decision-making.

References


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