

Middle Level Conference Committee Notes

January 26, 2012

Tom Venable distributed the Middle School Conferences Committee work as outlined in the handout. Members looked over the purpose, basics for establishment, the decision making process and plan of work.

Participants had the opportunity to reflect, as individual participants and collectively as a committee, on their thoughts from our work up to this date.

Thoughts shared included:

- * Concern about leaving the student out of the conference discussion. Strong focus on the teacher and parent.
- * Is the conference committee work focused on "middle level" or a broader perspective (elementary as well)?
- * Is this committee charged with how a Student Lead Conference (SLC) should look or the work of family engagement?
- * SLCs may not work for every student and parent. Address the tension points in the system such as the preparation and instructional time taken away due to student prep time for conferences. Could we look at different opportunities to showcase student work and communicate with parents—thinking differently about how we communicate out to families? Do we need five days to prepare?
- * Conversation has expanded to being about family engagement in general, but also coming back to the idea of different types and purposes for conferences.
- * Struggle with what we do at a conference, how do we BEST utilize the time with parents and students - we try to do so much in a conference session - dual purposes, sometimes competing for the time. Both valuable. The belief was expressed that the child needs to be present, no matter what.
- * Does the committee charter focus on adopting an elementary early release or high school schedule?
- * Our work goes back to purpose and goals - what is a conference? What is the purpose of the conference? What are the outcomes of a conference? What roles do families, teachers and students play in the conference? This needs to be established.
- * If we make a change that is not well defined it won't happen.
- * Perspective shared: conferences are not a time to be alarmed by new information and also not a time to problem solve. (Those conversations need to take place on an as needed basis.) They are a time for looking at student performance and highlighting what has been learned
- * Perhaps we need to define different types of conversations/settings (i.e. conference) for talking with families about their child's progress, etc.
- * Looking for a solution - probably not a one size fits all answer - the creative energy that can be generated by stepping out of the box of what we do can be very exciting and generate new thinking and forward movement. We tend to look at what we are doing within our own building rather than what we would want it to look like throughout the system.
- * Related to this work is the variability of what gets shared in regard to student learning, from one school to the next. Do we have agreement on what the standards we are

measuring and reporting on are? Do we use common assessments to determine proficiency levels?

- * It is not an and/or situation. It is a yes, we need to hold onto the experience of student involved conferences, AND we need to add additional ways in which we communicate with families regarding progress and performance.
- * Define different ways that we communicate with families regarding student progress and performance - description, purpose, frequency, roles, etc., - use this as a log of activities to show family engagement in a differentiated manner.
- * Where is the student at/how are they progressing? Where do we want them to be? What is the plan we have for them? What support do they need? Is it the same conversation, regardless of the student needs? Some variables might be: frequency, who is involved, other forms of interaction. Student is involved.
- * Student involved conferences, communication as needed.
- * Remind ourselves that we are middle school teachers with 100+ students - we need to be reasonable.
- * No one is saying, "throw out SLCs". But no one is saying that SLCs are enough on their own.

Summary of Discussion

- Increased student ownership
- Opportunities for students to exhibit their learning
- Use a differentiated model of family engagement – different types of conferences
- Provide staff and families with designated time focused on family engagement and information
- Preserve instructional time and flow throughout the year
- Professional development for staff in the use of technology to support increased communication between the school and home
- Adopt a common core curriculum and develop a standards-based reporting system
- Differentiation of what a conference is and how we fit this into a school year
- Different models for communicating progress for elementary, middle, high
- SLCs - what do we believe? We believe that SLCs are one way that we conference with families—or should we say—students should be a part of every conference?
- Let's keep the student in the middle of all of this
- Idea: The role of the people in the conference can change. Maybe we don't say Student Led Conference, but we hold tight to Student Involved Conferencing.
- The report card of current is not communicating to families the important information related to our targeted standards. It becomes a barrier.