

Promising Practice

Student Led Conferences (SLCs)

School: Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School (WHEELS) M348

Principal: Brett Kimmel

Relevant QR Indicators: 1.4, 2.4, 3.4



The Practice

Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School (WHEELS) considers the relationship between students' families and the school to be of paramount importance. At three times during the school year, the school invites students and their families to attend formal conferences during which report cards are given to families. At WHEELS, Student Led Conferences (SLCs) replace the traditional parent / teacher conference. SLCs are attended by the student, parent/guardian, Advisory class teacher (know as "Crew Leader" or "Crew Advisor" in Expeditionary Learning Schools), and other adults the student would like present. The Crew leader facilitates the meeting, but the student is in charge.

During the conference, students explain their progress toward and mastery of both academic (content/skill) and character (habits of work and learning) learning targets, which are student-friendly learning objectives based on NY state standards. Students justify their progress by leading their families through a portfolio of assignments culled from academic classes.

At WHEELS, Habits of Work and Learning (HOWL) learning targets are based upon the WHEELS Ways to Be: prepared, prompt, present, responsible, respectful, and open minded.

Students justify quarter grades in each class by referencing specific assignments that show their mastery of learning targets. Students also complete self-evaluations of their performance in each class and share them with their families. Students are held accountable for their progress when they explain areas of strength and areas in need of improvement. The tone of the conference is positive with a focus on what can be done to ensure success as opposed to what has been done poorly.

What was the rationale/ reason for implementing the practice?

- To increase student accountability and autonomy concerning academics and their habits of work and learning (HOWLS).
- To hone student verbal communication and critical thinking skills.
- To emphasize WHEELS' student centered philosophy.
- To build open relationships with families concerning student progress at WHEELS.
- To help students meet speaking standards.
- To teach students how to persuade by substantiating claims with evidence.

The following learning are the identified student learning targets:

	Learning Targets
HOWLS (Habits of Work and Learning)	I can make consistent eye contact when speaking.
	I can speak clearly, audibly, and at an appropriate pace.
	I can use an appropriate and respectful tone.
	I can answer questions directly and honestly.
	I can communicate ideas in an organized and coherent manner with appropriate and precise vocabulary.

Content / Skills	I can take responsibility for progress, explaining how and why I have improved.
	I can take ownership of my failures and mistakes.
	I can reflect on my work habits.
	I can create and share a plan for improvement or continued success.
	I can demonstrate my ability to follow the <i>Ways to Be</i> .
	I can explain the learning targets I met in each of my academic subjects.
	I can share examples and evidence from specific assignments in each of my academic subjects.
	I can use notes and outlines to help me present.
	I can include details and examples relative to the audience.
	I can conclude my presentation by reviewing the main points.
	I can synthesize and paraphrase information.
	I can make connections between sources of information.
	I can persuade my audience by substantiating claims with evidence.
	I can use language and grammar appropriate for purpose and audience.
I can use grammatically correct sentences when speaking.	
I can use facial expressions and gestures that help in communicating my point.	

How is the practice implemented? (i.e., people, process, data reviewed, time, frequency)

Role of the Student (process throughout the school year)

- The student is the main player of the student led conference. Teachers and Crew Advisors guide the students through the conference process and help the students prepare, but the responsibility of conveying information to parents and families rests on the students.
- Students continually self-assess their progress throughout the year based on learning targets.
- Each student keeps graded assignments in the appropriate binder or the student work folder. Students do not throw away work.
- Two weeks before conferences students cull two to three pieces of work from each of their academic working folders that demonstrate their ability to meet learning targets. Students put work in a single Crew folder that they take from class to class.
- Students complete self-evaluation checklists for each academic class. They reflect on their progress and the areas in which they need to improve. Students are prepared to share goals and strategies to obtain these goals with the important adults in their lives.
- They practice substantiating their grades with evidence from various assignments and their mastery of learning targets by taking part in mock conferences during Crew and subject classes.
- Students write formal invitations to their parents to invite them to SLCs.
- Students make sure that their parents fill out surveys and bring them to their Crew Advisors.
- Students write formal thank-you notes to their parents post SLCs.

Role of the Subject Teacher

- Each subject teacher is responsible for keeping the student informed about his or her progress according to learning targets. The teacher is also responsible for helping students select appropriate work to bring to the conference and for providing class time for this purpose.
- Each teacher has a list of students and corresponding Crew Advisors. Teachers share significant academic or behavioral concerns with the Crew Advisor immediately, not at the end of the quarter. Crew Advisors are alerted to any event in which the parent is contacted. Crew Advisors are invited to sit in on parent meetings.
- Each subject teacher creates a file system of student work. All assignments are placed in these folders. Students are taught to keep assignments available, either in their binders or in their working folders.
- Each subject teacher creates a list of learning targets for each unit covered during the marking period. As a general practice, the teacher explains the connection between assignments and learning targets. Teacher assessment is clearly aligned with student mastery of learning targets. The teacher helps students learn to explain academic progress in terms of learning target mastery. Grading is transparent and students know how they are doing in a specific class at all times so the final grade is never a surprise.
- Two weeks before conferences classroom teachers provide students with opportunities to cull work that demonstrate mastery of learning targets. Teachers help students select two to three assignments that show the learning process, preferably a multi-step project as opposed to a quick quiz. Improvement in skill mastery, like a gradual improvement in multiplication facts, geography recollection, or specific grammar exercises, can be shown in graph form to emphasize trends in progress, as opposed to performance on an assignment in isolation.
- Teachers create a self-evaluation form for students to complete according to their success in the class. This form includes the major learning targets and an area for goal setting. Students plan ways to meet goals in the upcoming quarters.
- Teachers model verbal exposition of the connection between assignments and learning target mastery.
- Teachers provide class time for students to practice substantiating their grades with evidence from their assignments. Teachers run mock conferences, specific to their subject area.
- After the conferences are over, teachers make sure to contact any parent who is concerned about his/her child's progress in a timely manner. Crew Advisors provide students with lists of students and their contact information.
- Teachers should be prepared to speak to the parents of any child who has failed the class or who has dropped significantly in either conduct or academic performance.

Role of the Crew Advisor

The bulk of SLC preparation happens in Crew and much of the responsibility lies with the Crew Advisor. Crew Advisors ensure conference quality across the grade levels.

In preparation for the conferences:

- Crew Advisors schedule conferences with the parents of Crew members during the specific conference times. Advisors clearly communicate the specific time for each conference with the students and their families. Advisors create alternate arrangements if parents cannot attend the

- Some families have multiple children attending WHEELS. Every effort should be made to provide parents with consecutive conference times for their children.
- Crew Advisors help students organize assignments and prepare for conferences. Crew Advisors review student self-evaluation forms, help students set new goals, and guide students in the creation of action plans to meet those goals.
- Crew Advisors help students develop agendas for the conference time and help them learn to manage time wisely when speaking.
- During Crew time, Advisors help students learn to speak thoroughly, but concisely about their work and general progress. Crew leaders should pay particular attention to speaking skills such as eye contact, pacing, audibility, body language, and use of visual aids.
- Crew time is set aside to practice student-led conferences with peers.
- Crew Advisors review the Student-Led conference assessment rubric with students.

Right before the conferences begin:

- Student-Led Conference schedules should be posted outside the classroom. Chairs should be provided for families that arrive early.
- The Crew Leader may want students to provide refreshments for their families and may want to have a table set-up for younger children with paper, crayons, picture books, or games.

During the conference (guidelines for Crew Advisors)

- Crew Advisors must stick to the schedule. If a parent arrives late, the conference must be truncated out of respect for the other families, but students may continue to share work in the hallway and report cards may be given to parents.
- Crew Advisors welcome each family, preferably using names, and thank them for coming. Crew Advisors remind families that the student will do most of the talking and that it is best to save questions for the end.
- Crew Advisors let the student speak. Crew Advisors may ask probing questions or direct the student to the agenda, but they do not dominate the conversation. Crew Advisors help the student if the parent is talking too much, and try to redirect the conversation if the parent begins to get upset.
- Crew Advisors make sure all of the paper distribution and signing happens without taking away from the student's presentation.
- Crew Advisors are prepared to answer questions about why the parents are meeting with them and not the subject teachers and SLCs in general.
- If a parent wants to meet with a teacher, then Crew Advisors record that information and tell the subject teacher the next day.
- Crew Advisors thank each family for coming and reaffirm availability for current or future concerns and give them a survey to fill out at home.

After the Conferences:

- Crew Advisors collect surveys from students over the next few days.

- Crew Advisors complete assessments for each Crew-member, debriefs the conference and discusses the student has made in Crew the next day.
- Crew Advisors inform subject teachers of any parental concerns.
- Crew Advisors help students write thank-you notes to family members who attended the conferences.

Role of the Parent/Guardian

The parent/guardian is the second most essential attendee to the Student-Led Conference and should be briefed about the format and objectives of the SLC so that the conference runs smoothly.

- The parent must be willing to let the student speak, saving questions until the end.
- The parent/guardian must arrive on time.
- The parent/guardian shares any lingering concerns with the Crew Advisors who will inform the subject teacher.
- The parent/guardian helps the student meet his or her academic and behavioral goals by supporting their progress at home.

What are the conditions for successful implementation of this practice?

Role of the school in ensuring success of this practice:

- The school prearranges Student-Led conference days, notifying teachers, students, and parents in a timely manner.
- The school shares the student-led conference format with the parents and is clear about the objectives of these meetings.
- The school encourages parent questions about our conference format.
- The school sends multiple reminders home to families in both English and other appropriate languages.
- The school provides teachers with report cards two days prior to the conferences so that students are not surprised by grades and can practice their conferences with concrete information in front of them.
- The school provides translators for teachers who do not speak students' home language.
- The school responds to parental concerns in a timely manner.

What protocols, techniques, and strategies accompany this practice and keep it running well/ sustained? Please attach any relevant artifacts.

One of the pieces of the backbone for success for Student Led Conferences is to have an effective advisory (known as "Crew" in the Expeditionary Learning Schools' model) component in the school. In this way, teachers are responsible for organizing conferences for only the 12-15 students in an Advisory group, as opposed to conferences for an entire class, an entire grade level or an entire teaching load.

Additionally, there is a need to be well planned, organized and coordinated across a grade level and an entire school. See the attached Student Led Conference Handbook for relevant artifacts to ensure success.

In what ways has this practice influenced decisions made in your school?

Decisions about how and when to communicate with families regarding students' academic progress are filtered through the lens of Student Led Conferences.

What positive outcomes have you observed following implementation of this practice for students, teachers, and the larger school community? Please cite specific evidence where possible.

Through the practice of Student Led Conferences:

- There is an increased level of student accountability for school work. Students know that they will need to show, talk about and defend their work three times per year.
- There is an increased level of family involvement in school. Families know that they need to attend three conferences per year.
- There is a built in mechanism for the school to communicate with families regarding academic progress. The School expects that all (100%) families, students and teachers participate in all conferences.

How do you provide professional development to support your teachers' (experienced and new) adoption and implementation of the practice?

Prior to the first Student Led Conference in the fall, all new teachers participate in a professional development session on the nuts and bolts of SLCs. We have also created a video of a Student Led Conference that we show to new teachers.

All teachers are allocated planning time during regularly scheduled grade-level meetings.

What was your timeline and process for development of the practice? Who was involved and what steps were taken to facilitate implementation of this practice?

We opened in September 2006 and implemented our first Student Led Conferences in November 2006. All teachers and administrators were and continue to be involved in SLCs. We adopted, adapted and continue to use an "all hands on deck" approach. That is, we believe in the efficacy of SLCs, it has become ingrained in our school culture and all students, families and staff participate.

What challenges have you faced in implementing this practice and how are you working to overcome them?

The biggest challenge is to convince stake-holders (students, families and teachers) that 100% participation is expected. We have had tremendous success in this regard by communicating clearly and allowing a one-week grace period after the official SLC day for remaining or rescheduled conferences to take place.