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Parent-Teacher Conferences Get a Makeover



Meredith Clark, upper right, a 1st grade teacher in Newnan, Ga., discusses her students' academic skill levels during a parent-teacher meeting earlier this month at Ruth Hill Elementary School, one of the schools that is revamping the traditional back-to-school night.
—Ruth Hill Elementary

By Sarah D. Sparks

Two years ago, back-to-school night at Ruth Hill Elementary School looked like most open houses.

"You would come to your teacher's class, meet the teacher, look at what's on the walls, see what's in the SOAR [behavior rules] report, and that's about it," said Lucia Woods, Ruth Hill's counselor. "That was our traditional communication method for years and years."

That was before the Newnan, Ga., school was tapped in 2014-15 as one of 10 schools in the state to pilot academic parent-teacher teams, a model developed by WestEd researcher Maria C.

Paredes five years ago to build more goal-focused, academically oriented relationships among teachers and parents, and among the parents themselves.

Academic parent-teacher teams are one way educators are starting to reimagine that autumn classic, the parent-teacher conference.

In spite of emerging online and text-messaging communication methods, the general meeting is still the most common—and for some parents, the only—contact with

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teachers during the year, and more school and district leaders are looking for ways to boost its impact.

The **APTT model** has spread to 250 schools in 16 states in the past five years. Georgia and four other states—Arizona, Florida, Montana, and Wisconsin—have launched grants for schools to train school staff members to create the teams.

"Our education system was not set up to create a professional learning community between parents and teachers," said Paredes, a senior program associate for family and community engagement at the research group WestEd. Traditional parent-teacher conferences were "never intended to be a place for learning, a time for parents to meet together and share what they know," she said.

Who Shows Up?

Nearly 9 in 10 parents—including more than 3 in 4 impoverished parents—attend general parent-teacher meetings each year, according to 2012 data, the most recent available, from Child Trends, a nonprofit data bank. That's more than 10 percentage points higher than any other type of parent involvement in schools—such as scheduled meetings with a teacher or school events or committees.

For poor parents, racial minorities, and those with low education levels, general parent-teacher conferences dominate school involvement methods by even bigger margins.

Yet the limitations of the traditional parent-teacher-conference model haven't changed much in the decades it's been in use.

"Conferences are short, the info a parent receives is hard to interpret, and it's unclear what **actions a parent or the teacher should take to maximize the student's strengths**," said Heather Weiss, the founder and director of the Harvard Family Research Project.

Moreover, studies have found these quick-hit meetings can be minefields for teachers, be they with helicopter parents or with those reluctant to engage because of other obligations or their own bad school experiences.


"Teachers are typically not trained to do this, and both parents and teachers are often anxious about it," said Weiss, which was not part of the WestEd project. "The parent-teacher conference has been bogged down with 'that's my job, that's not my job' arguments between teachers and parents. We need to reframe it as a shared responsibility and a public good."

Paredes conceived the academic parent-teacher team while working in Phoenix schools as a way to bring parents into a professional learning community.

At the 460-student Ruth Hill Elementary, it could be easy for parent-teacher conferences to become fraught. The school has the highest poverty rate in the Coweta County school district, at 80 percent, and the lowest performance on state tests. It has roughly equal-sized black and white populations, with a rising number of Hispanic students, and parents with a wide array of interests and concerns.

In Ruth Hill and other APTT schools, the first school meeting is long—75 to 90 minutes—and all parents meet together rather than individually. The teacher discusses the learning concepts that students must master by the end of the academic year and shows a chart of every child's status on a key foundational skill, like subtraction or reading comprehension. The chart is anonymous, but each parent receives a packet that includes the identification code for his or her child, to help them understand how their child performs in relation to peers.

Parents then each set a 60-day goal for their child on that foundation skill. The teacher models home activities to improve the skill, and parents work through them during the meeting.

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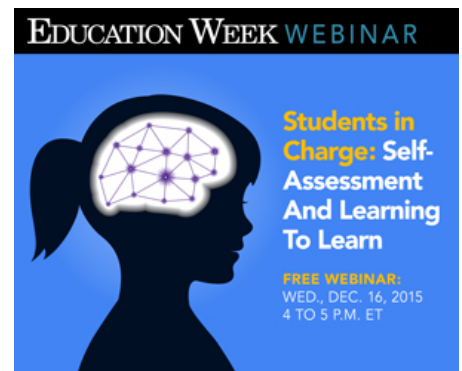
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They also receive materials required for the activities to take home.

Providing materials can put families on an even footing, said M. Elena Lopez, the associate director of the Harvard Family Research Project, who is not involved in the APTT project.

"For families facing economic disadvantages, who may have trouble just getting to the meeting, ... the question becomes, what can they do, and what's possible to do to make things better for their students?" she said. "That's an important question, and often it doesn't get brought up."

Year-Round Effort

After 60 days, the teacher meets with each family alone for 30 minutes to review progress on the goal they set together, as well as discuss any issues and introduce a new foundation skill and activities. The full parent group meets two more times, in each quarter of the spring semester.

Ruth Hill counselor Woods said the program has helped parents become more confident reaching out.

"Before, if there was a child struggling, the teacher might meet with a parent and say, 'Your child needs to work on multiplication,' but ... it appeared to us that frequently the parents didn't feel comfortable asking about it or they said 'OK, OK,' but then went home and didn't know how to [help]," she said. "Now, we model the activity, the parents practice the activity. So the chances of follow-through are so much greater."

Gail Parmer, the principal at Temple Middle School in Carroll County, another Georgia pilot school, said academic parent-teacher teams have changed discussions among parents from, " 'Let me volunteer and make copies or do a pizza night' to 'Let's focus on academics.' "

Participation rose precipitously, Parmer said, from about three parents schoolwide attending a January open house in 2013 to "parents in every hall, in every classroom" at the APTT meetings every quarter now.

"We all say we want parent involvement, but we have looked at the difference between parents being involved and parents being engaged in their child's learning," Parmer said.

She has received more enthusiasm from parents participating in the academic teams, she said, "because it's not us asking them to go sell something and work at some event; it's showing them we want their child to be successful."

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