

Barnes & Nobles Educators Nights – October, 2003

Dr. Michael Tudor presented to educators from the North Jersey area the following talk:

October for many of you represents conference time. As elementary school educators, you understand the anticipation that both you and the parents have in having that first conference of the school year.

As a classroom teacher of 2nd and 3rd grade, I can understand your concerns that you best represent the child to their parents. We, at this level of instruction, truly love those 28 in our class and want to express precisely and concisely what they have done well, what they need to do better, and how they are getting along in school. Usually, we end up having 25 minutes to all that in. Some districts may have longer conference times but many schedule conferences in 30-minute blocks.

You have had parents who stay beyond their time – the ones who you walk to the door but do not leave. Perhaps you have had the parent who arrives 15 minutes late and feel that s/he should be able to extend their time 15 minutes more. Being fair to all parents is important. It tells the parent how you are with their children. It reflects on you positively if you have a sign on your door which states: “PLEASE REALIZE YOUR CONFERENCE MUST END ON TIME IN ORDER TO BE FAIR TO THE NEXT PARENT. I WILL BE GLAD TO SCHEDULE OTHER TIMES TO ANSWER QUESTIONS.” This simple note makes it much easier for you to say at 25 minutes into the conference that 'we' have only 5 minutes more to wrap up.

What can be done prior to the actual conferences to make the 30 minutes the most helpful to the child and his/her parent? My colleagues and I found three things that helped us tremendously to make the most of conference time:

1. Back to School Night / Open House conference sign up and curriculum booklet;
2. Weekly letters following a format and shared by all grade level teachers; and
3. Pre-conference questionnaire filled out at least three days prior to conference.

In greater detail the three things that helped us look like this:

1. BACK TO SCHOOL NIGHT / OPEN HOUSE

Your school might have such an occasion scheduled in late September, or early October for parent to visit the classroom. We have had parents visit. Other years, we had parents *and* their children at open house. Most of us preferred an evening with only parents.

a. EARLY CONFERENCE SIGN UP. At Back to School Night, our class mothers signed up parents for parent conferences as they entered the classroom. The class mothers give a note to the parent stating the date and time the parent signed up for. This gave each of us weeks in advance to know when which parent was coming in to see us. It gave us the ability to change times and schedule some priority concerns earlier without offending anyone with last-minute changes in conference times.

b. BOOKLET DESCRIBING GRADE LEVEL CURRICULUM. Prior to open house, our grade level teachers met. We authored a description of our third grade curriculum to be handed out to parents at open house. This activity had two very important advantages for all of us. *Advantage #1:* Parents who were concerned that they did not get the grade level teacher that they wanted, tended to be comforted that the three

third grade teachers communicate and instruct the same third grade curriculum with each other. This was particularly helpful to a first year teacher on our grade level. Parents of older siblings often wanted Mrs. Z for the younger child and not the new teacher at the grade level. But the new person aboard was grateful for a team effort at supporting each other by sharing our goals and methods of how we were to implement the curriculum. *Advantage #2:* Parents did not need to ask at conference time what we were going to cover this year or what other sections of third grade are doing. It saved conference time for more important conversations about their child's progress.

What about the parents who did not come to the open house? Thanks to the class mothers signing up everyone who entered, the class mothers were able to follow up for us by calling those who did not come to open house or spent time in their older (or younger) child's classroom. The class mothers also took the responsibility of making sure that parent got a copy of the booklet on the grade level curriculum.

In summary, open house helped parent conference times by our teachers' knowing when which parent was coming to a conference very early in the school year and also knowing that the parents have a good idea what all of us are teaching at this grade level. It worked in a fashion that helped me represent more of their child to the parents at the limited conference time.

2. WEEKLY LETTERS

All third grade teachers wrote weekly letters that followed a particular format. This practice is often done in Pre-K, K and 1st grade but we followed it through the elementary school.

a. FORMAT. Every week the letter followed a similar format which included a statement about the math, reading, spelling, science and social studies curriculum projects and lessons. It also included a book title that the child was reading that corresponded to the studies of that unit. In addition, it presented two or more questions for the parents to ask their child. For example, the letter might state: "This weekend, ask your child what he/she thought of the film that they saw on Sarah Plain and Tall. Also ask your child to show you how they subtract with regrouping (borrowing) two digit numbers." The advantage of this aspect of the format is that children were no longer bothered by their folks asking them the general question every day: "How was school?" Parents in turn were happy because they no longer got the same old answer, "fine" or "boring." The answers were to questions that the parents thought were important to ask and the child was "usually" very proud to answer.

b. SHARED WITH GRADE LEVEL TEACHERS IN ADVANCE. The weekly letters were written in rough draft two days early so that they could be shared with the other two third grade teachers prior to sending it home on Friday. My grade level teachers had a chance to edit, correct, or question me about my letter's contents prior to parents' reading it. This helped grade level moral and it also helped me at conference time know exactly what my grade level teachers were saying to their parents. You know that a conference time a parent might ask you, "Why didn't you collect leaves? My next door neighbor's third grader was collecting leaves in October." Knowing precisely what your colleague did, you can answer accordingly and not be taken by surprise at the conference time.

3. PRE-CONFERENCE QUESTIONNAIRE

The parent was sent a confirmation form with a questionnaire (for a sample, see attachment). They were to sign this form confirming their conference date and return it with the questions answer at least three days prior to the conference. The questions varied from year to year but a brief example of questions follows:

- What does your child think of school this year?
- How does your child like school this year?
- What subject does your child feel they do best in?
- What subject does your child feel that they do poorly in?
- What subject does your child like most?
- What are your goals for me to do with your child this year?
- What are your concerns about your child?
- Does your child have any health problems that I should know about?
- What does your child do each day after school?
- What do you do together as a family?

These are examples. Parents varied in how they responded. Some wrote one-word answers to EVERY question: “fine”, “fine”, “fine”, etc.... Others wrote pages of response to each question. In either case, the pre-conference questionnaire helped us know what parents were going to say when they entered the 25-minute conference. It gave us a chance to prepare better for the conference. It raised the professional level of the conference. Conferences were no longer chat sessions but professional conversations about a particular child rather than what we did each week (answer in letters), what the school's curriculum was (answer in booklet from grade level teachers), or talking about what he/she does after school (answered in the pre-conference questionnaire). You might be saying that my parents won't answer my questionnaire. Some might. Those that don't have told you something about themselves prior to the conference that you might want to know.

I wish you the best for your conferences. I hope that sharing this with you has helped you think of things you might do prior to the conference to make the most of the limited time.

– Dr. Michael Tudor

FROM: Dr. Michael Tudor, 3rd Grade Class

This is a confirmation of the scheduled time for your child's conference.

Student's Name: _____

Conference Date: _____

Conference Time: _____

Please sign and return this confirmation note three days prior to the conference.

To best serve your child's interest, please take time to fill out this pre-conference questionnaire. The information you provide helps me better answer questions at the conference time.

1. What subject most interests your child?

2. What subject does he/she find most difficult?

3. Do you have to help your child understand homework directions?

4. What do you think about the homework? Is it too much, too little, too difficult or too easy for your child?

5. What would you like me to specifically do for your child that I might not be doing at this time?

6. Please fill in the afternoon schedule of activities your child faces in a week:
(For example: **M:** soccer **T:** religious ed. **W:** piano **Th:** ... **Fri:** ...)

7. Is there anything specific that you would like me to show you at the conference?

8. Please comment on how your child likes school this year and what concerns you might have.

9. Is there any allergy or health issue that our school nurse might not know?

Signed: _____

Date: _____