



Student Conferencing and Planning for Student Success



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Introduction

When students are struggling with behavior, attendance, and/or grades in school, we too often leave them out of the conversation when planning for their success. Students with disabilities are even more often left out of their own conversation. We can sometimes assume that they may not have adequate insights into their difficulties, and at times, we might even believe that the student is actually the problem. Student conferencing is a powerful tool for meaningfully including students in planning for their own success, including identifying barriers to learning that may not be self-evident. Students with various disabilities, even students with severe cognitive and emotional disabilities, can provide us with important information about their experience in school so that we can better approach the ways we shape learning opportunities for them as educators.

Student Conferencing and Supportive Questions

We sometimes study children like they are a cave person. We hold meetings where we discuss their progress, review their work samples as if they are cave etchings, and guess about what might be going on with the student. Frequently, these meetings are held without the student being present, and we miss out on an important opportunity to tap into the child's understanding about themselves. Student conferencing that centers around supportive questions give us the ability to build relational trust with the student, and to give them an opportunity to give us a glimpse into what the school experience is like for them as a student.

It is important to understand the prerequisite mindset for an educator who is entering into a student conference. We must believe that the student can do better than they are currently, that the student is inherently motivated to achieve and do well

(therefore, our goal is not to instill motivation in them), and that as a supportive adult, we are in a position to leverage positive change for and with the student.

Psychologist and author, Ross Greene, frequently writes and lectures on the mantra that "Kids do well if they can." Student conferencing centers around the belief that student underachievement in school is based on a skill deficit, not a will (motivation) deficit. Students who display challenging behaviors are often most overtly blamed for their behavioral difficulties in school, and as a result, they are frequently cut out of the conversation related to their educational planning. "If they would only just behave, then they would do just fine in school." This circular logic has harmed many children who have social-emotional learning deficits in schools. However, they are not the only ones who have been overlooked in the proverbial "achievement gap."

Students with disabilities have also had decreased participation in their own educational planning. As educators, our biases related to ability and learning deficits plays into this dynamic immensely. For students with severe cognitive disabilities, for example, we sometimes assume that they could not possibly tell us anything meaningful about the ways in which their school experience could be enhanced. Resulting from a lack of imagination and creativity, we often shy away from adapting these conferences to meet the needs of the student (using visuals, choice boards, etc.), and fall back on guessing about the root causes of their struggles in school. Student conferencing is a viable option for students of all abilities in school. We simply need to uncover and discover strategies for mining for the valuable information that our students can give us about how to teach them better.

Below is a list of supportive questions that can be used to guide student conferencing in a problem-solving and positive direction. There are many other questions that can be used when conferencing with students, and the methods used for students answering these questions can be adapted based on their needs. For example, a student who has either a communication disability or is simply less comfortable answering verbally can draw or write answers to their questions. Questions can be simplified to be answered using clip art or other simple visuals. Remember that the purpose of student conferencing is to build relational trust as well as to better understand the student's experience in school. Use the same creativity that you tap into in your instruction to decrease the barriers for students with disabilities. Every student, regardless of their areas of need and learning deficits, carries with them valuable information about ways that we can teach them better. Student conferencing, when it becomes embedded into the culture of a school, can transform the interaction patterns between students and teachers, and decrease the frequency of challenging behaviors.

Examples of supportive questions:

- What are you most proud of in your life?
- Tell me about what a good day looks like for you? What makes it a good day?
- What do you like doing? What makes this enjoyable?
- What do you find comes easily to you?
- What could be going better?
- What have you tried? And what has been helpful?
- What do you find you learn most easily?
- What do you want to achieve in your life?

- What are the things in your life that help you keep strong?
- What would other people who know you say you were good at doing?
- You are resilient, what do you think helps you bounce back?
- How have you faced / overcome the challenges you have had?
- What are three things that have helped you overcome obstacles?
- If you had the opportunity what would you like to teach others?
- What is the most rewarding part of your life?

Conclusion

You do not need a counseling degree to lead an effective student conference. Like any new skill, it takes practice, feedback, and an openness to do student conferencing well. You might benefit from co-leading your first student conferences with a trusted colleague who is more comfortable, especially if you are very nervous. Do not let your initial nerves keep you from forging ahead and practicing this important skill. When meeting about students, be the person who speaks up and says, "Why don't we schedule a student conference to see what they have to say about it." We increase our chances of success when setting goals and planning interventions when students have been involved in the planning themselves. Students who participate in conferences about their own success in school are building important communication and social-emotional skills while engaged in the process, and these skills endure throughout their life.



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