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ABSTRACT

In at least one Oregon school system, student-led conferences have begun to replace traditional report cards. When conferences are well done, parents believe they have learned more about their child's learning and progress than they would through a traditional report card. There is an important additional benefit in that students can rise to the occasion and take charge of their own learning in important ways. A successful student-led conference is the culmination of careful planning and preparation that involves explaining the concept to teachers, students, and parents. The experience of the Touchstone Learning Center in Lake Oswego (Oregon) illustrates the successful use of student-led conferences at the kindergarten level, with student groups rotating through stations demonstrating activities and materials. Experiences of other Oregon schools demonstrate that the conferences are not difficult to manage, and that they have beneficial motivational impact on students, who are eager to present their portfolios to parents and to other interested people. Appendixes present an organizing chart and a description of portfolio activities for seventh graders. (Contains 7 references.) (SLD)

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ED 377 241

# Student-Led Portfolio Conferences

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**P**ORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT OFFERS A unique opportunity for students to take an active role in their own learning and explaining what they have learned to others. Portfolios support the concept that students should become independent, self-directed learners. Portfolio assessment is something students do, not something done to them. It is assessment that they can share with other people.

The concept of the portfolio comes from the arts. Artists produce collections of materials that tells a coherent story about themselves as artists. It is a way for them to demonstrate competence. Because no two artists are alike, no two portfolios are alike. But each portfolio gives a unique picture of individual skill and growth.

One way to translate this traditional concept directly into the classroom is to encourage students to use their portfolios as part of a presentation they make about themselves as learners. Some schools are looking at replacing the traditional parent-teacher conference with student-led conferences. Rather than teachers and parents meeting to discuss the student's progress, the student becomes a participant, playing a central role in presenting him or herself as a learner. As the name implies, the student takes charge of the conferences, using the portfolio much like artists use their portfolios. Student-led conferences have been used even at the kindergarten and primary levels.

But to use student-led conferences effectively, the student must be able to tell a story about themselves as learners. This requires that the student

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make decisions about their own portfolios. The student must be able to make good selections for the portfolio, and in order to make good selections, the students must be able to evaluate their work. Thus, the portfolio becomes more than the device that helps tell the story, it becomes part of the process through which the student learns to tell the story of their own learning. The portfolio become an integral part of the learning that is to be presented (See Paulson, Paulson, and Frazier, in press; and Paulson and Paulson, in press, for a discussion on how students can be encouraged to become more effective evaluators of their portfolios).

The idea of student-led conferences employing portfolios is catching on. In at least one school system, student-led conferences have begun to replace traditional reports cards. When well done, parents come away with a feeling that they have learned more about their child's learning and progress than through a traditional report card. But there is an important additional benefit. Students can rise to the occasion and take charge of their own learning in important ways. When students are truly accountable for their own learning, they become more motivated to improve that learning.

Using student-led conferences effectively requires teachers to rethink some of their traditional roles. Teachers must develop new ways to interact with students and parents.

- For students must be able to effectively present themselves as learners, they must learn to evaluate themselves. The focus of evaluation moves from teachers evaluating students to teachers teaching students to evaluate themselves. The teacher's role in evaluation changes.
- Students must take the lead in student-led conferences, not be put in the role of an audience member as the teacher talks about how well or poorly they are doing. The student is the presenter, the parents are the audience. Although teachers play an important and active role in helping students get ready for student-led conferences, they remain in the background as much as possible during the actual conference.
- If student-led conferences are to be effective, teachers must prepare students, parents, and possibly even school administrators. Some parents and administrators may be uneasy with an approach that has the student performing a task that is traditionally the teacher's. The teacher must make it clear that he or she plays a critically important role in student-led conferences, but that role is in helping students prepare themselves to conduct the conference in a competent manner.
- Finally, student-led conferences are innovative and some parents may be uncomfortable with giving up the familiarity of traditional reporting formats like report cards. We recommend either continuing to use traditional reporting procedures along with student-led conferences, or, if you wish to change over, do so gradually.

Generally, parents respond positively to the student-led conferences and most are satisfied that they have learned more about their child's learning than from traditional grades. Nevertheless, some parents may be concerned about how their child is performing as compared to other students, some-

thing student-led conferences are not designed to reveal. There are two things to consider when dealing with this kind of concern. First, be ready to hold a traditional parent-teacher conference during which you can address the student's learning from your perspective as teacher. Second, remember that traditional grading practices are highly variable from one classroom to another, one teacher to another. Therefore, it is difficult to argue that traditional grading practices give a realistic picture of how a child ranks with respect to other students.

Another parent concern might surface if students are "over rehearsed" — that is, they give what appears to be a rote, canned presentation. In preparing for student-led conferences, create an atmosphere that supports conversation between student and parent.

### Preparing for Student-Led Conferences

A successful student-led conferences is the culmination of a careful planning and preparation. During the months leading up to the conference, the teacher must become create an environment that is supportive and students help students prepare themselves to take on what may be an unfamiliar role.

#### *Preliminary Activities*

How teachers introduce the concept and prepare the students is a key to successful conferences. Here is a list of things that should occur early in the school year.

1. Be sure everyone knows about the student-led conferences and is aware of the rationale for using them. As soon as possible, inform all involved that you will be holding student-led conferences and why. These groups include (but may not be limited to):
  - The students,
  - Their parents,
  - The principal,
  - Other teachers in your building,
  - District administration if the effort is widespread (in which case, hold a meeting for all teachers.)
2. It is especially important to contact parents early. Here are some of the points that teachers should communicate, either in an open house for parents at the beginning of the year or by letter (see Anthony, et.al., 1991).
  - We are starting a new format for parent-teacher conferences. (It is usually best to emphasize that student-led conferences expand the conferences rather than eliminate a format many parents value.)
  - You will receive a personal invitation from your child to attend a conference primarily with your youngster.

- These are the Goals for the conference.
  - accepting responsibility for their work,
  - learning to organize, present, and communicate,
  - learning to self-evaluate, and
  - becoming more accountable.
- This is an opportunity for parents to show a positive interest in their child's progress and growth.
- The teacher will be in the room and available.
- You will be given the opportunity to meet privately with the teacher for a traditional parent-teacher meeting if you request.
- Remind parents to bring their child with them to the student-led conference (Yes! we attended a student-led conference evening at one school in which the teachers had described the conferences at parent night, the children had written their parents invitations describing the conferences they would be leading, yet two separate sets of parents arrived for the student-led conferences without their student with them. We were at another student-led conference in which the parents brought their student with them but left the portfolio at home.)

### *Early Preparations*

Once the school year has begun, there are several early steps that prepare the stage for successful student-led conferences. The first step in implementing student-led conferences is to build a communication link between parents and students. This should begin well in advance of the first student-led conference.

1. Talk about student-led conferences during the first parent night of the year, explain what it is about, and take questions.
2. Make it clear that, any parent can request a parent-teacher conference after the student-led conference.
3. Develop a procedure that encourages students and their parents to respond to each other about the student's work. It is important to encourage the parents to respond to the student, not to you, the teacher.

One technique is called "Two Stars and a Wish" (Hartmann, 1992, Appendix A). Each week or so, the student takes home a sheet of paper that tells two positive school experiences ('two stars') and one area in which the student is trying to improve ('and a wish'). Parents asked to respond to the student in writing, being as positive as possible about the 'stars' and as supportive as possible about the 'wishes.'

4. Some parents or administrators may fear that the student-led conference abdicates some of the teachers' responsibility. It is important that the purpose is carefully explained and the beneficial aspects of student involvement are clear (see 'Goals' above). The communication link also gives you the opportunity to clearly establish that your role is changing from that of parent-teacher conference leader to that of teacher preparing students to assume more responsibility for their own learning.

### *Preparations Immediately Before the Conference*

As the conference itself approaches, the pace of activities increases.

1. Students should begin preparing for the conference well in advance. Portfolio activities can support such preparations (see Hartmann, 1992). Hold brainstorming sessions with students regarding the kinds of things they would like to share. Have each student build a list of things they would like to share with parents. Remember, the student-led conference is an opportunity for the children to tell their own stories. Encourage each child to individually think through the challenge of understanding what they have learned and how to present that learning to their parents.
2. Work with the students in the weeks leading up to the conference. Discuss the kinds of things that make suitable entries and effective ways to display them. Treat the challenge as one of their presenting themselves and their learning in an accurate but positive light. Don't require them to put in anything they don't feel good about. Encourage students to write letters about their portfolios to be read by people looking at their portfolios.
3. A week or so ahead, have each child write a letter to the parents inviting them to the conference. Encourage the children to talk about the kinds of things the parents will see (Anthony, et.al., 1992).
4. Encourage students to use the entire classroom as an environment to support their conferences. Students may take their parents to various learning stations of displays in the classroom to better explain their presentation.
5. It is a good idea to schedule one or more rehearsals. Some teachers start by holding model conferences in which the teacher plays the role of parent and one or another student volunteers leads the discussion while the rest of the class watches. This is followed by having the students pair off and present their portfolios to each other (Hartmann, 1992). Some students do additional work on their portfolios following this experience.

### **The Conference**

There are many approaches to the conferences themselves. Conferences can be held one at a time similar to parent-teacher conferences, or for the entire class simultaneously. Some schools have conferences once a year, others quarterly. Choose whichever approach makes most sense with your students.

1. Put the students in charge of the conference as much as possible. Let them help set up the interview schedule, arrange the room, arrange for parents to bring refreshments, and work out other details. It should be the student's show as much as possible. Beth Hebert, a principal whose elementary school holds portfolio evenings each spring, writes that the event "is really the children's evening, and they need to 'run the show' as much as possible. Parents and teachers have been impressed with the leadership and independence that even our youngest students have demonstrated in this setting" (Hebert, 1992, p. 61).
2. You, of course must take the age of the student into account when using student-led conferences. Generally, younger children require more help

and structuring while older children assume an increasingly independent role. Let us take a look at one way kindergarten teachers have found to support student led conferences.

Teachers from the Touchstone Learning Center (a school serving grades K - 3) in Lake Oswego OR developed a technique specifically to help kindergarten children run their own conferences. The teachers set up five "stations" in the classroom, each representing one part of the curriculum at the school. The five stations ensure that the young children will talk about curricula the teacher wants covered while reserving for the students as much choice as possible about what to put into their portfolios.

**Portfolio.** In the Touchstone program, students are given complete choice about what to place into their portfolios, thus children have a personal story to tell through their portfolios that may or may not focus on specific school curricula.

**Writing.** This station features the child's writing folder and copies of books they have published as part of the writing curriculum. The children particularly enjoy reading these books to the parents.

**Physical Education.** Touchstone a PE teacher who also does separate PE portfolios with the children. In these portfolios, the children learn to set fitness goals, track their own progress toward those goals, and work on drawings and other materials that allow them to find ways to relate the physical activities to concepts associated with muscles and the like.

**Math.** The math station emphasizes demonstration more than history of learning. The teacher has set out several math manipulatives activities that the students can demonstrate as the parents watch.

**Science.** The science station includes several examples of hands-on science activities that the children are doing. For example, there may be small potted plants each child is growing.

Students and parents go through the conference in groups of five, each starting at one of the five stations. With fifteen children in the program, the teacher schedules 3 one hour conferences. At each station, the children talk about and explain the activity and materials and answer parent's questions. After 8 minutes, the teacher's timer rings and the five groups rotated to the next station. Each station provides a structure that encourages each child to address specific parts of the curriculum rotating stations guarantees that the discussion would be comprehensive. Prior to the conferences, the children had led practice conferences with their classmates.

The Touchstone teachers believe that this structure provides help keep the conferences on-track with very little teacher intervention. In fact, the PE teacher initially planned to remain at the PE station but found that she felt like an intruder on a process that involved the students communicating with their parents about their progress. Touchstone feels that the added structure imposed by stations are unnecessary beyond the kindergarten level. Touchstone's first graders lead conferences from a single station.

Elmonica School in Beaverton, OR also used centers for its first graders during the first conference in the fall. The staff posted charts describing the kinds of activities each center to help parents know what is expected at each center in case the children forgot.

3. Middle school offers challenges of its own. Students are reaching a stage

where they can exercise considerable control not only leading their own conferences but in defining the situation itself to the visitors.

Winnie Charley, a teacher at Jackson MS in Portland, OR proposed to her students that they hold a portfolio evening during which they would invite parents to come to school and review their portfolios. The students felt particularly vulnerable at the prospect of sharing their work. They wanted to show parents what they were doing but they were concerned the atmosphere of the presentations remain positive.

The class therefore designed, wrote, and produced (complete with recorded music) a series of brief skits which explained to parents exactly how they were supposed to act during the portfolio evening. Portfolio evening began with an audience of parents viewing the skits. "Arcenio Hall" interviewed famous people with opinions about portfolio evening including Darth Vader who said, "be nice to your child — I was nice to my child and its not easy for Darth Vader to be nice to anyone," and a broken-heart Smurf who sobbed, "my parents put me down — don't put your child down." (For further information, see Appendix B to this paper)

4. Unfortunately, not all parents are willing to attend such conferences and some children do not have parents. It is important in such cases to find someone to fulfill the role of surrogate parent. Children living in institutions have caretakers who may be willing to help (Paulson & Paulson, 1992). It is important for the students to present their portfolios to a caring adult.
5. Occasionally some sort of prompting may be helpful, especially with younger children. Some teachers prepare sample questions that parents can ask their children. Such questions should focus on the child presenting thoughtful explanations rather than rote recall (e.g., "Tell me about how you go about solving this problem" rather than "What is the answer?"). When stations are used (such as the Touchstone Kindergarten described above), it may be helpful to set up some sample activities that the child can use to demonstrate skill and learning to the parents.

### Management Concerns

Here are some examples of things teachers have learned about managing student-led conferences. If there is a general rule-of-thumb, it is to allow the student to take as much responsibility for the event as possible.

The actual conferences are not difficult to manage. Students usually arrive accompanied by their parents. After introductions, the students and their parents can go directly to the place where the presentation will take place and begin. Be advised that younger siblings can be disruptive, especially if they are vying for attention. It may be wise to have an engaging activity prepared.

It is important that the teacher remain in the background as much as possible. Only occasionally should a teacher intervene but then only to strengthen the child's presentation by redirecting the discussion or reminding the child of additional possibilities (Anthony, et.al., 1991).

After the conference, the child may ask the parents to write a response. Be sure this portion remains positive. Parents should focus on progress, not dwell on shortcomings. It is useful for the teacher to have a class guest book

for parents to sign and record comments. This should happen after the conference is completed so that you can get comments.

Conventional parent-teacher conferences last about 15 minutes, student-led conference often last much longer. However, student-led conferences make it possible to hold more than one conference at a time. At several schools, all student-led conferences are held on a single day.

- Sandy Hartmann (1992), fifth grade teacher from Wyoming, Michigan holds two conferences simultaneously in the same room. She circulates between the groups. She plans to double the length of each conference by holding four conferences simultaneously. Since conferences replace report cards in Sandy's class, she schedules student-led portfolios conferences four times a year.
- At Crow Island School (Hebert, 1992), there are as many as seven conferences going on simultaneously. Conferences are held in the spring.
- At both Touchstone Kindergarten (described above) and the first grade at Elmonica School in Beaverton held three to five conferences simultaneously with parents rotating from station to station. Both found it disruptive when one of the parents arrived late. In both schools, all conferences are completed in a single date.
- At Cherry Park School in Portland's David Douglas district, three second grade teachers scheduled two sessions on a single night and divided their classes in half. Each session lasted about 1/2 hour (afterwards, one of the teachers said, "I felt more like a hostess than a teacher!"). The only problem was with the earlier group in which some parents felt that the time was too short.
- The entire class led conferences simultaneously at Jackson MS (described above), making it possible for the evening to be introduced with a skit. All conferences lasted at least 45 minutes and several were still going strong after one hour.

After the conference, the teacher should give the class the opportunity to debrief and talk about the experience. This is also a good opportunity for them to think about changes they might want to make for next time.

## Other Issues

Do not overlook the motivational impact of having students present their portfolios to people other than the parents. A visit by the principal or an outsider who is interested in their work may stimulate considerable portfolio activity.

Students who assume responsibility for their own learning begin to set goals for themselves and monitor their own progress toward reaching those goals. Student-led conferences encourage this. Achieving this requires a supportive atmosphere where students are willing to present and their work. Student-led conferences work in an atmosphere that is positive and supportive.

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APPENDIX A

TWO STARS AND A WISH

\*\*\*\*\*

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_

Stars of complements:

1.

2.

Wish or improvements:

1.

Parent:

Stars or complements:

1.

2.

Wish or improvement

1.

Source: Sandy Hartman, Wyoming, MI

## APPENDIX B

### Portfolio Evenings in a 7th Grade Class

Based on material supplied by Winifred Charley,  
Jackson Middle School, Portland

My interest in portfolios began about three years ago when I began teaching in middle school. My students began portfolios in the fall, but by January we usually lost steam. I just didn't follow through. I knew it was a good idea, but somehow I was falling short. I'd start again the next September, but somehow I never carried through all the way

Then I heard and read about "portfolio evenings" in which students presented their portfolios to their parents. But the concept really frightened me. I could see a student sitting with his parents, showing them his portfolio and saying, "This is what I've learned this year," and the parents looking at the portfolio and saying, "Oh, my God, you haven't learned a thing. What kind of a ninny teaches you." I wasn't ready to take the risk.

This year I became more serious when a portfolio class was offered by the district. During the course of the instruction, I saw some videos and read some articles about portfolio evenings that had succeeded in other parts of the country. So I tentatively suggested to my students that we might give a portfolio evening in the spring. When I mentioned the possibility to my principal, she loved it. Suddenly, I was giving a portfolio evening.

#### The Portfolio Program

My class is a seventh grade combination of writing, reading, and social studies. This year, the portfolios primarily reflected reading and writing although many students included examples of books they had read or reports they had written in social studies. Some of the things I had done earlier started to take on a more refined form this year. One of them was that after giving students a substantial writing assignment, I asked student's to write a self-reflective statement before they handed it in for critique and assessment. I asked them to comment of several things, for example the way they used verbs, whether their writing was more "alive," and the like. My intention was to get them thinking about the quality of their writing.

I also added a process through which I communicated directly with each student. I called it the Writing Goal Sheet. The Writing Goal Sheet was a T-chart on which I listed things I noticed they did well and two or three suggestions for improvement. These became goals. Students wrote those on the Goal Sheet and the next time a writing assignment was due, they wrote a

specific message explaining what they did to meet their goals. I returned that assignment with new goals, and so there was better follow through on goals.

In the area of reading, I introduced a record keeping procedure I call a 'block assignment' which allowed students to keep track their reading. It dealt with areas like content, attitude, or striving for excellence. Their grade was tied to how many blocks they completed. Every Friday they analyzed their reading and filled in the blocks.

Also, early in the year, I asked students to write me a message telling me about themselves, describing themselves as a writer and an learner. That was one of their first self-reflective activities. We did this again at progress report time and at other times throughout the year.

We divided the portfolios into several sections.

- The first section was for reading. This included the block assignments, reading journals, and list describing themselves as readers.
- The second section was for writing. They included their list describing themselves as a writer followed by material from the full process writing program that I asked them to put into their portfolios. The section also included their Goal Sheet listing the areas on writing each was working on. In addition, I asked them to include a major research report assignment that they had done at the end of the first semester.
- The third section included their selection of work according to criteria I specified. From their writing folders I asked them to pull an example of their "best work" and attached an explanation of why they thought it was their best work. I also asked them to chose an example of something they really liked and to write a short paragraph about why they liked it. Finally, I asked them to chose something they had struggled with and to add a note explaining why it was such a struggle.
- The fourth section of the portfolio was the self-reflection section. Here they wrote about how they felt they were doing and doing in reading, writing, social studies, and as a cooperative group member midpoint in the quarter, at the end of the quarter, and at other key times. I also asked them to keep a process diary during their big research project. The diary recorded tracked how their understanding changed as they went along.
- The final section of the portfolio was complements. If someone in my class really helps another student understand something, that student writes a complement saying — for example, "Pat really helped me understand what the main idea is." The student would sign and date it and give it to Pat. Ultimately, it would show up in the complement section of Pat's portfolio.

### Preparing the Portfolios

Active preparations for portfolio evening began about six weeks before the date was set. We began with group brainstorming sessions in which I encouraged the students to recall what they had learned this year in reading

and writing.

After the brainstorming sessions on what they had learned collectively, I asked each student to make a list of how he or she had changed as a reader or a writer during their seventh grade year. Once they had made their claims on paper, I asked them to go into their work and find evidence to support the claims. They attached "Post-Its" to places in their portfolios that demonstrated an example of their growth. For example, if a student claimed to understand what a theme was, he or she would attach a "Post-It" in their reading journal or piece of writing that indicated that this illustrated an example of their understanding of theme.

### Preparations for Portfolio Evening

As portfolio evening approached, I tried to involve students as much as possible. We set up four committees. One was in charge of making the classroom look good. A second was in charge of hospitality such as calling parents and arranging refreshments. The third thought through the requirements of the space requirements. And the fourth planned a skit that would explain to parents what to expect during the course of the portfolio evening. The committees were a good idea because every student in the class was involved. It meant that, along with presenting their portfolios, each an additional reason for being there that night. The committees helped generate enthusiasm for portfolio evening.

Three weeks before the evening took place, we sent a letter home to parents describing portfolio evening and asking them to reserve the date. The hospitality committee came up with a very nice invitation and a request for an RSVP which we sent out three days before the portfolio evening. The kids also decided on the refreshments they would like (cupcakes and 7-Up) and made a list of parents who they thought would bring refreshments and called the parents. Really, they did it all themselves!

The setup committee had a really good idea that was different from mine and their idea turned out to be the best idea. They decided to use the large, area central to all 7th grade classrooms for the common meeting place. They moved some desks from the classroom into this area so that desks could be spaced far apart for privacy. We also borrowed other teachers' classrooms so that there were no more than six students conferences in any one room.

### The Portfolio Evening

As they entered, the visitors were greeted by a small theater style setting with all chairs facing the front of the central area. The portfolios were lined up (in alphabetical order) on a table at right and the hospitality table was close by. Clearly, everything was ready for an event when the portfolio skit began at 7:15.

The skit, written, directed, and produced by the students was in an entertainment talk show format ("The Arcenio Hall Show") in which the emcee interviewed various fictional and real characters (e.g., Darth Vader, a Smurf, their teacher). The skit, though entertaining, had a serious message — it told the parents to look at learning as something that was in progress and not to expect perfect, finished work. The class was in the process of learning and that the parents would see things where wrong (spelling, punctuation), but they would see was growth and learning. The point was to celebrate accomplishment, not criticize shortcomings. The skit was entertaining and got the evening rolling in a lighthearted way.

After the skit, the students got their portfolios and escorted their parents to one of the conference centers. Students simply went through their portfolios and talked about what they had learned during the year, often documenting their accomplishments by showing examples identified by the Post-Its. The evening was low key but intense. The skit had put the parents into the right mind set. Nobody was critical. Everyone was very accepting and in just about every case they saw growth.

There were some instances I really did worry about — students whose portfolios were kind of thin and the students hadn't tried very hard that year. This was where I was afraid I was going to be "fined" because I didn't do a good enough job teaching the student. It really didn't turn out that way. I'm thinking of one family, new to the district, who had complained at a PTA meeting that our West Coast schools weren't up to par with East Coast schools. When I checked my records, I found that their student hadn't been turning in any homework. The conference itself was one of the few cases where there was tension between the parents and the student. The portfolio told a clear story of a student who had done little during the semester (in fact, I had privately noticed the mother sneaking a peek at other student's portfolios earlier in the evening). During the portfolio evening the father sought me out and commented that the portfolio spoke for itself and it was evident that his son hadn't been working very hard all year. I was relieved not to be blamed.

### Reflections

I was very pleased with how portfolio evening turned out and would recommend it. But, portfolio evenings take a lot of energy — they do not happen by themselves. It takes a lot of classroom time to do it right. It takes support from the administration to keep the school building open in the evening. It takes support from parents and energy from the teacher because your enthusiasm goes over to the kids.

We set no time limit and the students and the parents conferred for close to an hour. I used a response form in which I asked parents to give their child two complements and state one area where they would like to see improvement ('Two Stars and a Wish.' Comments on this form were warm and supportive. Parents really appreciated the opportunity to talk.

One boy in my class is from a broken home. At the conclusion of the evening, his father told me that he really enjoyed it because for seven years he asked his son how things at school were going and the boy answered "OK." "Tonight, my son told me how school was. Tonight, I really found out what was going on." His son commented, "I like portfolio evening much better than parent/teacher conferences because parents and teachers talk about you when you're just sitting there and you feel very unimportant. Tonight I felt like I was important. I had something to say."