



# What Parents Really Want out of Parent-Teacher Conferences

by Shannon Brandt

*Discover how a fourth-grade teacher turned once-dreaded conferences into valuable assessments, evaluations, and action plans.*

I closed my classroom door, yanked down the “Conference in Progress: Do Not Disturb” sign, and headed home in relief. For me, the school system’s annual conference day evokes anxiety and exhaustion. Though I have changed my approach many times over the years, I had not discovered a way of reporting a child’s progress to parents that truly connects all the parties involved . . . until now.

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## More Details, Please

For a successful conference, I know to begin with something positive, create a warm and inviting atmosphere, and be straightforward, but not insensitive. While all these things have proven beneficial, I felt that I was not giving parents all the information they needed.

I began supplying parents with more details and a written account of my comments. Parents seemed pleased with these detailed evaluations, enjoyed hearing about their child’s successes, and seemed genuinely interested in working on the weak areas. So why did I feel like it was not sufficient? In my graduate class, I found the answer—the fourth-generation evaluation method.

## Fourth-Generation Evaluation

The term *fourth-generation evaluation* seemed foreign and complicated. I was not familiar with first-, second-, or third-generation evaluation, much less fourth. As my professor described fourth-generation evaluation, I knew I wanted to try it in my classroom.

Fourth-generation evaluation has three main components. First, it includes a multitude of assessment tools. Second, it involves stakeholders in the evaluation process. Third, the evaluation is followed with a plan of action. By adopting this method, I knew I could create a more comprehensive approach to informing and in-

volving parents in their child's school life, which had been my goal from the start.

### Including Many Assessments

My first step was to create a comprehensive evaluation for parents that would include many different assessments. Though I believed I was already doing this, I soon realized that an important piece was missing. I was using various methods to reach a conclusion about a child's performance, but only sharing with parents the bottom line, not the individual testing results. Remediating this would be an easy task; I just needed to add several new components to the narrative evaluation form I was already using.

My original form included the student's self-assessment and my evaluation as the teacher in six academic areas (reading, language arts, spelling, math, social studies, and science) and four behavior categories (organization, responsibility, conduct, and social skills). I added: the results from the previous year's Stanford Achievement Tests (SAT), broken down into subtests; results from the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI), an oral reading assessment given individually to each child; scores from timed multiplication tests; and a handwriting sample. Authentic assessments and surveys, which could not fit on the form, were kept close at hand to show parents. Soon I had 11 pieces of information for parents to consider, in addition to the conversation we would have about their child.

As I formulated this new type of evaluation, I was mindful of the time demands created by the extra work. I knew that if this system took too much time out of an already

overloaded schedule, I would not be able to continue with it, much less bring other teachers on board. Though the narrative reports I had been creating take 20–30 minutes per child, the time spent is well worth the sacrifice. Adding the test-result measures to the form would take about 2–3 minutes per child. This new section of my form was *doable*.

### Involving Stakeholders

My next step was to identify and involve stakeholders. In fourth-generation evaluation, as Martens (2002, 9) noted, "the emphasis is on collaborating and negotiating among all the stakeholders as a change agent in order to 'socially construct' a mutually agreed-upon definition of the situation."

Though I considered including the student in parent-teacher conferences, I opted not to do so. When

conferences in addition to the traditional parent-teacher conference. Thus, I decided that I would involve the students and some of the other stakeholders, but the parents and I would be the only ones physically present.

As I generated a list of stakeholders in a child's education, two were obvious—the student and the parent. In addition, I was a stakeholder, and so were the other teachers in the building. Other family members, especially grandparents, were added to my list.

I asked students who they thought their stakeholders were, after explaining the definition of a stakeholder (it is *not* someone trying to kill a vampire, as one student suggested). I was pleasantly surprised when they suggested brothers, sisters, and friends. One girl explained that she was a stakeholder in how her brother did at school,

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I tried student-led conferences with parents several years ago to review writing portfolios, students were highly motivated and parents enjoyed seeing their child in the role of self-assessor. It never failed, however, that the parents would pull me aside and ask for my honest opinion. The parents didn't want to hurt their child's feelings or stifle creativity, but they did want the bottom line on the child's progress. I realized that I needed to hold these student-led

because, if he received a good report each week, her family could eat out at a favorite restaurant. She knew that her brother's behavior and work habits at school determined what she ate for dinner. Another student considered herself a stakeholder in her friend's performance because, if the friend did not do well, the parents might ground her, and they would not be able to play together. Beyond that, friends could influence one another's attitudes about school

and could encourage (or discourage) good study habits. With my students' "out of the box" thinking, I included friends on the list of stakeholders. In all, I now had six groups of people who might care about how a particular child was doing in school: the student, parents, the classroom teacher, resource teachers, other family members, and friends.

Now I needed a way to get each group involved. Obviously, the parents and I were involved in the actual parent-teacher conference. The student also was involved in self-assessing and meeting with me to discuss strengths and weaknesses. I created a simple form for resource teachers to complete, asking about the child's strengths and weaknesses, along with general observations. With the help of some fourth graders, we developed a Friend Survey, and each student chose two buddies to complete one. I debated having other family members contribute their input, but decided that the best way to involve grandparents, siblings, and other family members was to give parents a way to share the information from the conference. Because the evaluations were written and a copy was provided to parents, they could be shared with anyone else parents deemed a stakeholder in their child's education.

Involving the stakeholders could be a logistical nightmare, occupying both my and other people's time. Once I decided to involve stakeholders through surveys and written reports, the time element became less of a factor. Resource teachers, chosen by the students, could complete student reports when convenient; my form reportedly took them two to four minutes per child to complete. The survey

that the students' peers filled out took less than five minutes of class time, and students that had more than two to complete willingly took theirs home to finish. As for my time, involving stakeholders did not generate any more time than I was already committing.

### Action Planning

The last critical element of fourth-generation evaluation, and the one to make all the preparation and planning worthwhile, was the action plan. This was the part where we (student, parents, and teacher) would decide what we needed to do with all the information before us. The form I produced was simple. At the top, I had a place to list the most pressing issue for that child. Next, I had a spot for the student, the teacher, and the parent to list what each would do to help with the problem. When signed and dated at the bottom, the form had the appearance of a serious contract.

Even though the student was the most important part of the action plan, I first shared the form at my conferences with parents. The next week, I sat down with each child to discuss his or her progress. As I shared the action plan form with each student, I helped the student choose an area of focus, and together we decided what the two of us could do to make improvements. The child then took the form home, for parents to fill in the remaining part, and returned it to school the following day.

I was amazed at the creativity and commitment both the parents and the child put into the action plan. For one child, we identified comprehension with silent reading as an area to improve. Specifically, we addressed the child's tendency

to skip words or even entire sentences that he did not immediately understand, especially when he was reading silently. As his action plan, the student listed, "Practice. Highlight words that I do not know, and use sticky notes to write down words that confuse me to ask about later." For their action plan, the parents offered to "purchase copies of current reading group books at a local bookstore so that Jeff can use a highlighter to mark words and sections. We will also wean away from dual reading, having Jeff read a chapter, then I will read a chapter and we'll discuss together afterward." Several parents wanted guidance from me in how to help their child, and I was happy to offer advice and recommend strategies.

Even in the first few weeks following the conferences and the development of the action plans, I could tell a big difference in the areas on which each child chose to concentrate. It was like we were all a team and we knew who our other team members were. It also helped that we chose only one area at a time. Students knew they were working on the same problem that their parents and their teacher were working on, so the task seemed less overwhelming.

Always mindful of how much time each element of this comprehensive approach was consuming, I timed each action-plan student conference. Students easily identified their area of focus, and the longest I met with any one student was just over six minutes. Because we are constantly self-assessing in my classroom, and conversations about my expectations never cease, this "conference" was typical of our everyday happenings. Only now, we were being more formal in re-

ording and committing to our goals. Using spare moments, I was able to complete all 23 action-plan conferences in one week.

Because I was sending the form home for parents to complete, the parents were able to work on their own time. I had all but two completed forms within the following week. This, along with the other components I added to achieve comprehensive evaluation, were feasible in my hectic schedule. Now, what would the parents think?

## Findings

At the end of each conference, I gave parents a survey with open-ended questions and a place to rank the importance of each of the 12 conference items. As parents began to send back the surveys and rating scale, I was shocked to see the importance placed on several items.

### Evaluation Items

*In order of most valuable to parents (19 parents responding)*

- Conversation with Mrs. Brandt during Conference
- Student/Teacher/Parent Action Plan
- Student Self-Assessment
- Teacher Assessment (narrative)
- SAT Scores
- Math Objectives List
- QRI Results
- Report Card Grades
- Resource Teacher Survey
- Writing Rough Draft
- Friend Survey
- Timed Multiplication Graph

I had expected the traditional forms of evaluation (report card grades and standardized tests) to rank near the top of every parent's list. Instead, I found the number

one, most important tool for the majority of parents was the conversation with me. Parents valued my opinion as the teacher/expert and liked the personal interaction of being able to ask questions and provide insights about their child. After the conference, one parent wrote on the survey, "I was a little surprised that his multiplication

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was not better, but felt better after we discussed the possible reasons." Nothing beats simple face-to-face conversation for explaining things, clearing up misunderstandings, and building relationships.

The student/teacher/parent action plan earned the next highest ranking from parents. Because this was a new aspect of conferencing, I was excited to see parents embrace the idea of joining with their child and me in setting reachable goals. One parent recorded, "I fully believe in this 'buy-in' from all three parties. This holds all of us accountable for the student's success—very important!"

Ranked third was the student self-assessment. "I am particularly interested in how my child feels about himself," wrote one parent. "I loved the self-evaluation sections on the assessment sheet. This, to me, is every bit as important—if not more so—than the

grades he receives." Many parents echoed this sentiment. Too often, we leave the child out of the evaluation process when he or she is the most important stakeholder. Through self-assessments, children become intrinsically committed to improving and reaching their goals. When the drive for success comes from within, my job as the teacher becomes much easier.

Many parents commented that all 12 conference items were helpful, but especially valued one other item—my written narrative. I predicted this would be the case because I have been doing the written narrative for several years, and every year parents comment on how much they appreciate my effort. Through these detailed reports about a child's learning and well-being, I provide the framework for us to develop the action plan, which is now the heart of our comprehensive evaluation.

## Final Thoughts

For the next parent-conference day, I have decided that the sign on my classroom door will read "Conference in Progress: Please Come In!" I just might leave the sign up all year because comprehensive evaluations are never finished; they wait patiently until more evaluation is needed (Guba 1989). My role as evaluator will continue to evolve as I gather parent input and monitor my students' progress in achieving their goals. My approach to providing comprehensive evaluation to parents is here to stay, and my students' parents would not have it any other way.

## References

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