

STUDENT LED CONFERENCES:

Students Taking Responsibility

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B.A. University of South Carolina, Upstate, 2008

A Research Paper Submitted to the Graduate School of

Southern Wesleyan University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Education

Professor: Dr. Paul Shotsberger

2010

**ABSTRACT**

One of the many challenges that face middle grade students, parents, and teachers is the student's lack of ownership of their academic achievements. Student- led conferences are a unique way to engage the student and the parent in the academic progress. Parents and teachers discuss the student's attitude toward the work, the student's work ethic in the classroom, the student's ability to perform on assessments, formal and informal, and the student's ability to manage their responsibilities. How can the teachers and parents turn ownership back over to the student? One answer is to allow the student to run the conference. If we direct the responsibility of explaining the work and work ethic, through formal and informal assessments, we place the responsibility of those achievements and failures on the person who ultimately has the ability to change the outcome, the student. This study indicates that students can accept and reach the goals and high expectations of academic achievement when given the opportunity to own their work and success.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

One of the many challenges that face middle grade students, parents, and teachers is the student's lack of ownership of their academic achievements. Teachers and parents speak on a regular basis through emails, phone calls, and conferences regarding the current grades of the students. Parents and teachers discuss the student's attitude toward the work, the student's work ethic in the classroom, the student's ability to perform on assessments, formal and informal, and the student's ability to manage their responsibilities. Through the sharing of all of this information, the student is either not present during the conference or talked about, as opposed to talked to, during the conference. Through this process of conferencing the teachers and parents enable the student to take a back seat in their academic success. The teachers and parents take on the student's success and failures instead of allowing the student to take ownership of those achievements and failures. The question then becomes, how can the teachers and parents turn ownership back over to the student? One answer is to allow the student to run the conference. If we give the student the responsibility of explaining their work and work ethic, through formal and informal assessments, we place the responsibility of those achievements and failures on the person who has the ability to change the outcome.

### **Justification for the Project**

Traditional parent teacher conferences do not allow for student acknowledgment and ownership of academic achievements and failures. The traditional way of conferencing generally excludes the one individual that has control over the outcome of academic success. Student led conferences allow students to take responsibility for their grades and successes.

### **The Statement of the Problem**

This study will validate the necessity for student led conferences among middle grade students in order to promote ownership of academic achievement. This study will test the concept that middle

grade students become more engaged in their academic success when they are held accountable for the explanation of their academic results.

### **The Research Questions**

This study will answer questions:

1. Will the student's academic ownership increase from the first student led conference in the fall to the second student led conference in spring?
2. How does the student leading the conference with the parent put the student in the role of owning their work and the grades that reflect their achievement?
3. What impact does sharing academic growth with their parents have on the student's desire to improve their academic level?

### **The Hypothesis**

If students are given the opportunity to present their successes and failures to a parent or caring adult, then the student will take an ownership and a proactive approach to academic achievements or failures.

If student led conferences replace traditional conferences it will enable the student to develop an intrinsic ownership of academic achievement.

### **Summary**

If we give the student the responsibility of explaining their work, work ethic, formal and informal assessments, we place the responsibility of those achievements and failures on the person who has the ability to change the outcome. This can be accomplished through the use of student led conferences. The research hopes to show that the student will gain an understanding of their strengths and the student will also be able to have a clear understanding of their weaknesses. This will then place the student in the role of taking responsibility for their academic achievements and allow the student to question their failures.

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of Related Literature

#### Introduction

The purpose of this research is to validate the necessity of student led conferences among middle grade students to promote ownership of academic achievement. Traditional conferencing places the responsibility of failure and achievement on the teacher and parents. It requires the parent and teacher to look for ways to motivate the student to improve academic achievement. This method leaves out the individual that is ultimately responsible, the student.

#### Traditional Conferences vs. Student led Conferences

Teachers understand this concept but continue to use traditional conferencing as a way to keep parents informed, motivate students, and correct academic behaviors.

Parent teacher conferences traditionally have been used to facilitate communication between the home and school. Hackmann continues, although students are expected to assume responsibility for their academic progress, they are usually excluded from parent-teacher conferences. The traditional end of term conference may be viewed with distrust by middle level students, since they often view it as an opportunity for parents and teachers to “talk behind their backs.” Students are typically forced to sit at home, anxiously awaiting the results of the latest meeting. Instead of fostering open communication among the three parties, traditional conferences may discourage honest student dialogue with parent or teacher. (Hackmann, 1996, p. 31)

Many students will miss lead the parent and teacher in order to avoid the situation. Student led conferences eliminate this problem by placing the responsibility of the conference on the student. The student, therefore, is the one that brings the parent into the conference. This will also help to reduce the lack of parent participation that in some instances can become an issue. Many parents believe that once their child reaches middle school, the student should be responsible enough to take care of their

responsibilities in the classroom. Giving the student the responsibility of conducting the conference with the parent reinforces student's responsibility to themselves and their parents. Borba and Olvera, (2001), state that traditional conference concept raise two concerns: low parent attendance and student indifference. A review of the literature led Gustine Middle School staff to conclude that the absence of students during parent-teacher conferences might be a leading factor responsible for those problems. "While achieving all of the goals of the traditional parent-teacher conference, the student-led conference model takes a significant step toward engaging student as active partners in the educational process. The student accountability fostered by this model teaches responsibility and encourages students to develop a sense of ownership for their academic progress. More importantly, it encourages middle school students and their parents to engage in frequent discussions centered on academic issues." (Hackmann, Kenworthy, & Nibbelink, 1998, p. 39)

### **The Benefits of the Process**

Student led conferences allow the student to obtain satisfaction and understanding of their academic abilities and responsibilities of their learning. "When student led conferences are coupled with the use of portfolios, students assume more responsibility for their learning and see connections among and between their learning in and outside of school." (Conderman, Ikan, & Hatcher, 2000, p. 22) The student led conference has a number of steps that must be taken in order to prepare the student for success in the conference and these steps must be in place in order to insure success.

**Inform.** First parents and students are informed of the change in district practice regarding traditional parent-teacher conferences. Educate, model, and teach...students should learn about their new roles from their general and special education teachers. In this step, teachers provide specific instruction about portfolios and the component involved in the student led conference. **Set goals.** After students have been introduced to the concepts of student led conferences and portfolios, they begin setting academic, social, behavioral, service learning, community involvement, and recreational goals.

**Practice.** Working from an organizer sheet or a script outline, students now roles play their student led conference. **Implement.** Students now reflect on the feedback they received during the practice step, and parents are invited to the 30 minute conference.

**Evaluate.** Finally, the evaluation step involves gathering feedback from students, teachers, and parents and modifying the process. (Corderman, Ikan, & Hatcher, 2000, p. 23-24)

Giving the students the tools and helping them develop an organization of their work will provide confidence that the student will need to be successful leading the conference. Allowing the student to select work to be discussed during the conference gives the student ownership of the work. “Many students have never looked at an “A” paper and thought about how they could improve it. With this insight, the students begin to take more pride in their work and look for improvements before they turn in their assignments.” (Shannon, 1997, p. 48)

### **Achieving Ownership through Reflections**

Corderman, Hatcher, & Ikan (1998) agree that alternative assessments such as portfolios provide students with valuable experiences about the richness of learning, growth, and exploring. In essence, the student led conference is seen as a reflection on the students learning. Students reflect on the work they present, the lessons that were taught and their understanding of those lessons, and how well they were able to express their understanding to their parents during the conference. The reason for self-reflection is to allow students to better understand their strengths and weaknesses as learners. The reflection process should be used to focus the student’s attention on their successes as well as their failures in order for the student to be able to set obtainable goals for improvement.

When students were asked to reflect on their work, Shulkind (2008) found that by articulating their learning and growth to their parents, students felt that their academic strengths and weaknesses became clearer. She also states, sitting in on student-led conferences, I heard student after student comment on his or her learning, progress,

skills, effort, and accomplishment. Students profoundly reviewed examples of strong work, made an honest assessment of the work, and identified subjects that they found challenging. Students earnestly described their goals for improvement and parents talked about their children's responsibility for their shortcomings. Through student-led conferences, assessment became more than what happens after teaching and learning are over. Instead assessment is the learning itself-an integral part of the feedback loop among parents, teachers, advisers, and students.

Empowering the student through self assessment can only lead to student ownership and the acceptance of responsibility in their learning.

### **Summary**

Student led conferences balance the scale giving the student the ability to express their learning and understanding to their parents and teachers. When the student is placed in a position to evaluate and explain their success, they gain a deeper understanding of their academic abilities. When the student is focused on their academic achievements they are more focused and engaged in the learning process. This research will provide support indicating how student led conferences impact the student's acceptance of responsibility.

## CHAPTER 3

### General Methodology

The purpose of this study is to determine if student led conferences will motivate students to take responsibility for their academic success. The researcher will provide a cumulative review of the student's response to ownership of academic achievement. This study will validate the necessity of student led conferences among middle grade students to promote ownership of academic achievement. This study will test the notion that middle level students become more engaged in their academic success when they are held accountable for the explanation of their academic results.

### The Research Design

The research design is a qualitative assessment through the use of survey questions. The independent variable will be the adding of student led conferences in the fall and spring of the 2009-2010 academic years. The dependent variable is the intended increase of academic ownership among the student body. The constant is the continued use of traditional parent-teacher conferences as needed through out the school year.

### Target Population

The target population used in this study is sixth, seventh and eight grade students, the teachers of the individual students and the parents of those students at Sevier Middle School. A series of questions will be used to evaluate the experiences of the student, teacher and parent upon the completion of the spring student led conference.

There are several limitations in this study: the understanding that all of the students are leading the conference; and the survey is completed thoughtfully and honestly by student, teacher and parent. It is assumed that all of the students chosen will have a grade point average between 3.5 and 2.5 and that all participants will take the survey seriously.

### Specific Treatment of the Data

The first research question asks whether the student's academic ownership increases from the

first student led conference in the fall to the second student led conference in spring?

The second research question asks how does the student leading the conference with the parent put the student in the role of owning their work, and the grades that reflect their achievement?

The third research question asks what impact does sharing academic growth with their parents have on the student's desire to improve their academic level?

### **The Data Needed**

The data needed to address the first research question will be a survey that contains specific questions towards the student regarding their experience with the student led from fall to spring.

The data needed to address the second research question will be a survey with questions that specifically address the teacher and parent's experience with the student leading the conference.

The data needed to address the third research question will be a survey that contains specific questions regarding the change in intrinsic ownership of academic responsibility, directed to the teacher and parent.

### **The Location of the Data**

The data is collected at Sevier Middle School. The student, teacher and parents will complete all surveys at Sevier Middle School upon the completion of the student led conference in the spring of 2010.

### **The Means of Obtaining the Data**

The surveys will be distributed to six teachers at Sevier Middle School prior to the student led conference in spring 2010. Each teacher will select 20 students that have a grade point average between 3.5 and 2.5. At the end of the student led conference the student, parent and teacher will complete a survey that answers specific questions about the student led conference experience and how it impacted the academic responsibility of the student. The surveys will be collected prior to the student and parent leaving the conference. The researcher will collect and analyze the surveys at the end of student led conferences. See appendix for a copy of the survey questionnaires.

### **The Treatment of the Data**

The researcher will analyze the survey to determine if the student's academic ownership and responsibility increased as a result of student led conferences. In analyzing the survey the researcher will evaluate the student academic progress from fall 2009 to spring 2010. The researcher will determine growth of student ownership through the sharing of academic achievements with the parent. The researcher will evaluate for intrinsic motivation of academic improvement due to the student led conference.

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

Chapter 4 presents the results of a qualitative research method to determine the effects of the participation of students in a student led conference. For the qualitative results the researcher assessed parents and students at the completion of student led conferences at the end of the school year. The assessment methods used were parent and student surveys. Grade levels sixth, seventh, and eighth were provided surveys to be completed at the end of the student led conference. During the spring student led conferences, 30 parents at each grade level and 30 students at each grade level completed a survey.

The first research question asks whether the student's academic ownership increases from the first student led conference in the fall to the second student led conference in spring. Five survey questions were posed to the parents. Three of the five questions of the survey specifically addressed the increase of the student's academic ownership from the student led conferences held in the fall and the spring. Parents were asked to rate student's success as (1) consistently, (2) usually, (3) occasionally, (4) infrequently, or (5) never, as seen in Appendix A. The first reflection question included on the parent survey stated "student led conferences helped my child to be more focused on his/her grades." 31 of 90 parents responded consistently, 31 of 90 parents responded usually, 14 of 90 parents responded occasionally, 8 of 90 parents responded infrequently, and 6 of 90 parents responded never. The second reflection question included on the parent survey stated "My child was more focused because of the goals that he/she set at the beginning of the year." 35 of 90 parents responded consistently, 21 of 90 parents responded usually, 18 of 90 parents responded occasionally, 8 of 90 parents responded infrequently, and 8 of 90 parents responded never. The third reflection question included on the parent survey stated "student led conferences improved my child's focus on achieving their personal best." 38 of 90 parents responded consistently, 26 of 90 parents responded usually, 10 of 90 parents responded occasionally, 7 of 90 parents responded infrequently, and 9 of 90 parents responded never.

Five survey questions were posed to the students. Two of the five statements specifically

addressed the increase of the student's academic ownership from the student led conferences held in the fall and the spring. Students were asked to rate their success as (1) consistently, (2) usually, (3) occasionally, (4) infrequently, or (5) never, as seen in Appendix B. The first reflection question included on the student survey stated "student led conferences helped me to focus on my grades throughout the year." 28 of 90 students responded consistently, 28 of 90 students responded usually, 17 of 90 students responded occasionally, 13 of 90 students responded infrequently, and 4 of 90 students responded never. The second reflection question included on the student survey stated "setting goals at the beginning of the year helped me to stay focused." 28 of 90 students responded consistently, 25 of 90 students responded usually, 17 of 90 students responded occasionally, 12 of 90 students responded infrequently, and 8 of 90 students responded never.

The second research question asks how, does the student leading the conference with the parent, put the student in the role of owning their work, and the grades that reflect their achievement. One of the five questions of the survey specifically addressed the role of the student taking ownership for their work due to the requirement of the student to conference with the parent. Parents were asked to rate student's success as (1) consistently, (2) usually, (3) occasionally, (4) infrequently, or (5) never, as seen in Appendix A. The reflection question included on the parent survey stated "I was able to help my child remain focused on his/her goals set during the student led conference." 41 of 90 parents responded consistently, 23 of 90 parents responded usually, 14 of 90 parents responded occasionally, 3 of 90 parents responded infrequently, and 9 of 90 students responded never.

Five survey questions were posed to the students. One of the five statements specifically addressed the role of the student taking ownership for their work due to the requirement of the student to conference with the parent. Students were asked to rate their success as (1) consistently, (2) usually, (3) occasionally, (4) infrequently, or (5) never, as seen in Appendix B. The reflection question included on the student survey stated "student led conferences made me take responsibility for my learning." 36 out of 90 students responded consistently, 23 out of 90 students responded usually, 13 out of 90

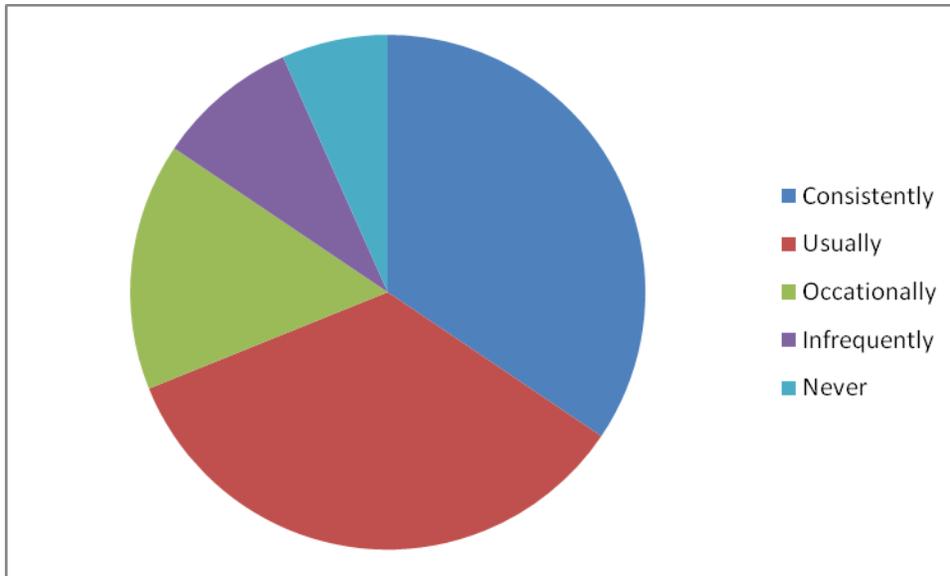
students responded occasionally, 10 out of 90 students responded infrequently, and 8 out of 90 students responded never.

The third research question asks what impact, does sharing academic growth with their parents have on the student's desire to improve their academic level. One of the five questions of the survey specifically addressed the student's desire to improve their academic growth when it requires the student to share the information with a parent. Parents were asked to rate student's success as (1) consistently, (2) usually, (3) occasionally, (4) infrequently, or (5) never, as seen in Appendix A. The reflection question included on the parent survey stated "My child's effort improved because the work could be part of his/her portfolio." 26 out of 90 parents responded consistently. 33 out of 90 parents responded usually, 15 out of 90 parents stated occasionally, 10 out of 90 parents responded infrequently, and 6 out of 90 parents responded never.

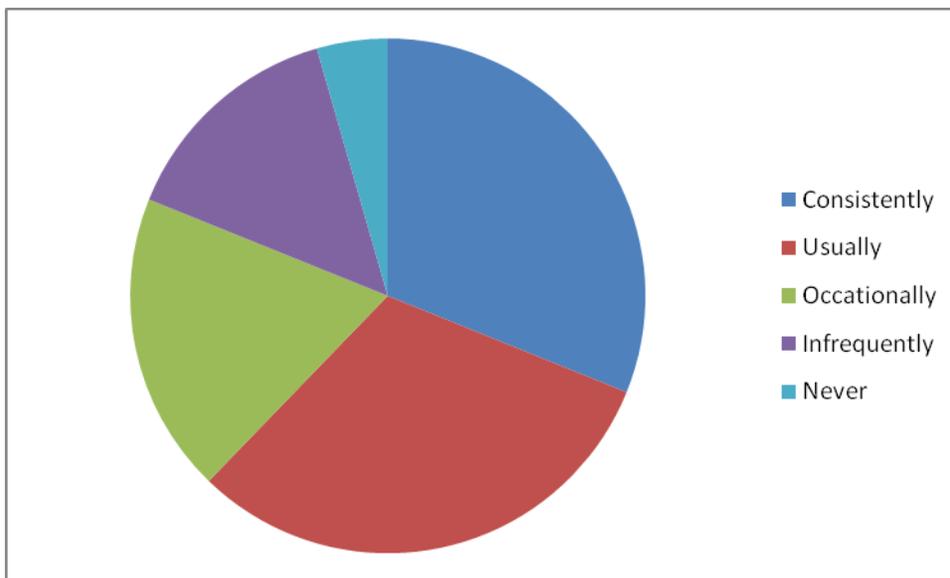
Five survey questions were posed to the students. Two of the five statements specifically addressed the student's desire to improve their academic growth when it requires the student to share the information with a parent. Students were asked to rate their success as (1) consistently, (2) usually, (3) occasionally, (4) infrequently, or (5) never, as seen in Appendix B. The first reflection question included on the student survey stated "I put more effort into my work because it could be part of my portfolio." 36 out of 90 students responded consistently, 18 out of 90 students responded usually, 15 out of 90 students responded occasionally, 17 out of 90 students responded infrequently, 4 out of 90 students responded never. The second reflection question included on the student survey stated "sharing my goals with my parents helped me to stay focused." 28 out of 90 students responded consistently, 28 out of 90 students responded usually, 14 out of 90 students responded occasionally, 11 out of 90 students responded infrequently, 9 out of 90 students responded never.

The student led conference survey questions were answered at the completion of the student led conferences in the Spring of 2010.

**Figure 1:** Student Led Conference Reflection Survey Questions for Parents.



**Figure 2:** Student Led Conference Reflection Survey Questions for Students.



## **CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION**

### **Summary**

The purpose of the research was to determine if student led conferences would increase student achievement based on the student's ability to take ownership of their work and academic achievements. The measuring instrument was researcher created survey questions for the student and the parent. A series of five reflection questions were specifically directed to the parent and five reflection questions were specifically directed to the student. The results of the survey determined that both parents and students consistently and usually felt that student led conferences allowed the student to take ownership of their academic achievements.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The results of the survey concludes, "When student led conferences are coupled with the use of portfolios, students assume more responsibility for their learning and see connections among and between their learning in and outside of school." (Conderman, Ikan, & Hatcher, 2000, p. 22) The survey agrees that, "While achieving all of the goals of the traditional parent-teacher conference, the student-led conference model takes a significant step toward engaging student as active partners in the educational process. The student accountability fostered by this model teaches responsibility and encourages students to develop a sense of ownership for their academic progress. More importantly, it encourages middle school students and their parents to engage in frequent discussions centered on academic issues." (Hackmann, Kenworthy, & Nibbelink, 1998, p. 39) Students and parents in this study indicate significant understanding of the value of the student led conference. With the use of the Likert scale parents and students responded to various survey questions that indicated that parents and students agreed the student led conference provided ownership of student learning to the student but also allows the parent the opportunity to support the learning of the student.

Students were asked a series of short answer questions at the end of the student led conference

program. The purpose of the questions was to determine how the student led conference effected or changed the conversations between the student and the parent. Students made reference to the ability to discuss their grades and academic accomplishments with their parents without a confrontation.

“This was the first time that my parents and I talked about my grades without yelling at each other.”

### **Recommendations**

The findings of this research indicated an increase in student ownership of academic achievements through the use of student led conferences. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations for further research are made:

4. All future studies should include a student and parent survey for the fall student led conference and the spring student led conference.
5. All future studies should include an academic standing prior to the student led conference in the fall for each student surveyed.
6. All future studies should include an academic standing for each student surveyed at the end of the student led conference in the spring.
7. For future studies there is a need to conduct this survey across all socio-economic areas, including those schools that fall within a low income area.

Future research should include a survey for those parents do not participate in the student led conference.

One of the many challenges that face middle grade students, parents, and teachers is the student’s lack of ownership of their academic achievements. If we give the student the responsibility of explaining their work and work ethic, through formal and informal assessments, we place the responsibility of those achievements and failures on the person who has the ability to change the outcome. This study indicates that students can accept and reach the goals and high expectations of academic achievement when given the opportunity to own their work and successes.

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## Appendix A

### Student Led Conference Survey for Parents

*Please circle the response that best reflects your experiences during student led conferences.*

- |   | Consistently<br>1 | Usually<br>2 | Occasionally<br>3 | Infrequently<br>4 | Never<br>5 |
|---|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student conferences helped my child to be more focused on his/her grades.                          |                   |              |                   |                   | 1 2 3 4 5  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My child's effort improved because the work could be part of his/her portfolio.                    |                   |              |                   |                   | 1 2 3 4 5  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My child was more focused because of the goals that he/she set at the beginning of the year.       |                   |              |                   |                   | 1 2 3 4 5  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I was able to help my child remain focused on his/her goals set during the student led conference. |                   |              |                   |                   | 1 2 3 4 5  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student led conferences improved my child's focus on achieving their personal best.                |                   |              |                   |                   | 1 2 3 4 5  |

## Appendix B

### Student Led Conference Survey for Students

*Please circle the response that best reflects your experiences during student led conferences.*

- |   | Consistently<br>1 | Usually<br>2 | Occasionally<br>3 | Infrequently<br>4 | Never<br>5 |
|---|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student led conferences helped me to focus on my grades throughout the year. |                   |              |                   |                   | 1 2 3 4 5  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I put more effort into my work because it could be part of my portfolio.     |                   |              |                   |                   | 1 2 3 4 5  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Setting goals at the beginning of the year helped me to stay focused.        |                   |              |                   |                   | 1 2 3 4 5  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sharing my goals with my parent/guardian helped me to stay focused.          |                   |              |                   |                   | 1 2 3 4 5  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student led conferences made me take responsibility for my learning.         |                   |              |                   |                   | 1 2 3 4 5  |