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A REPORT ON THE INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE IN EDUCATIONAL
LEADERSHIP AND PARENT CONFERENCES
AT DELSEA MIDDLE SCHOOL

by
Jill M. Bryfogle

A Masters Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree in the Graduate School
of Rowan University
May, 1998

Approved by _____
Professor

Date Approved April 21, 1998

Abstract

Jill M. Bryfogle

A Report on the Internship
Experience in Educational
Leadership and Parent Conferences
at Delsea Middle School
1998
Dr. Ronald L. Capasso
School Administration

The purpose of this study was to make parent conferences more meaningful for those involved. To do this, the intern intended to increase parental attendance at conferences in her school. She tried to achieve the goal of increasing attendance by giving out a survey to parents and teachers who were present at conferences. The questionnaire asked people how to improve conferences. Responses were tallied and then discussed with a committee of parents, teachers and administrators who decided which ideas to put into action. Changes were made to conferences. Attendance data was taken before and after the changes. Then the two figures were calculated into percentages and compared. After the completion of the project, the intern concluded that attendance did indeed increase. However more study was needed to determine if the increase was dependent upon the changes or another factor. Other conclusions that were reached were, the changes took a lot of time to carry out and they were not always welcome. Responses to the surveys and other data collection instruments were limited. In the future the intern would like to receive more responses from the people who do not show up to parent conferences.

Mini-Abstract

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This study's purpose was to make parent conferences more meaningful. The intern intended to do this by increasing attendance at conferences. After the project's completion, she concluded attendance did increase, however another year of study was needed. Survey responses were limited and the changes were not always welcome.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Focus of the Study

Problem Statement

“Effective parent-teacher communication is part of a strong foundation for student success in school” (Spaulding, 1994, p. 24). The values of teachers and parents talking and working together is widely researched and has been effective in helping children achieve more in school. One way this cooperation can be shown is by effective parent conferences. However, parent conferences are far from ideal in the school in which the study takes place.

Schools handle parent conferences in different ways. Some schools do not have conferences. Some have individual meetings after school for specific parents. Other districts have half days and schedule every parent for an exact time with the teacher. At the intern’s school district, conferences are held once each marking period after a written report of the child’s progress has been mailed home. These conferences are held three times a year, once in October, another time in December and again in March. The meetings are held on a Monday or Tuesday night from seven o’clock to nine o’clock. As in the past, conferences are not met with much enthusiasm and are not well attended.

Clearly, a dilemma exists in education as well as in the intern's district. Parents need to become more involved in their child's education. The predicament is no different at any school. Although many ways to explore this issue exist, the problem will be addressed at the intern's school by increasing attendance at parent conferences. Through promoting better communication between the teachers and parents, the children will attend more to learning and they will achieve more. This project is designed to strengthen the delivery of educational services to the students by increasing the effectiveness and attendance of parent conferences.

This act will be accomplished through the creation and implementation of a program entitled P.R.I.D.E. (People Really Interested in Developing Education). The goal of the study is to have 10% more parents attend seventh and eighth grade parent conferences between October 1997 and December 1997. To do this, the organization is going to make a procedure to increase parental attendance at conferences. By the third set of parent conferences, 25% of the students' parents will be at the meetings.

Since a tally of people who go to conferences has never been taken before, no information is available at the current time with regards to attendance. The intern is going to start an attendance procedure at conferences. She also will research and provide a list of effective conference tips to all seventh and eighth grade teachers in the school.

The purpose of this project is to increase the number of people attending parent conferences, and to make conferences more meaningful to those involved. By increasing parental participation in conferences, the intern anticipates the academic achievements of the students will increase. The intern is planning to prove her results by increasing

attendance at parent conferences by 10% between October 1997 and December 1997.

This increase should be a result of the intern's P.R.I.D.E. program.

Definitions

The following terms are used in this report. They are defined here to avoid any confusion for the reader.

V.I.P. - stands for the Very Important Parents organization. This group comprises parents and teachers. It is a committee of people who review the school's policies, and give suggestions to the administration regarding their implementation. They create ideas and suggestions for school functions. The V.I.P. plans workshops for parents and assemblies for children. They raise funds to pay for these activities. The group strengthens communication between the teachers and the parents. An important job of the V.I.P. is to act as a liaison between the school and the community.

P.R.I.D.E. - stands for People Really Interested in Developing Education. This group will be created by the intern solely for the purposes of increasing attendance at parent conferences and improving the effectiveness of these meetings. The organization will be creating a list of suggestions to make conferences better. The committee will be made up of teachers, parents and administrators.

Parent Conference - Usually, a parent conference occurs whenever a parent and a teacher get together to discuss a student. However, in this report, "parent conference" has a more specific meaning. The definition as it applies to the intern's school is the only meaning of concern for this study. Therefore, a "parent conference" is a meeting held between the parent(s) or guardian(s) and one subject area teacher. At this conference, the

parent(s) or guardian(s) wait outside the classroom door for that teacher to become available. When their turn arrives, the adults discuss the child's progress in that class or subject area. The student may or may not be present at the meeting. These conferences are held only on certain days at the intern's school between the evening hours of seven and nine. Two sessions are in early October, one session is in mid December and a final session is held in late March.

Parental Involvement - This means being aware of what goes on at school.

Parents or guardians can show their parental involvement by doing the following (which includes but is not limited to): writing and knowing the school's policies, being familiar with the behavior of their children in school, identifying what is being taught and learned in the classroom, visiting schools, participating in lessons, checking or helping with homework, studying with students and participating in school-sponsored activities and committees.

Limitations of the Study

This project is going to be researched, organized and started within the framework of the intern's school. The findings of this study apply strictly to the one school involved in the project. It is anticipated that the results of this study would be generalizable to other schools, however, that information is unavailable at the current time.

Setting of the Study

Before describing the school district in which the study takes place, the local area must be pictured. Two separate townships surround the intern's school. They are Franklin Township and Elk Township. In many ways the townships are alike, but they

are also very different. When appropriate, the author describes the similarities of both townships together. Their differences are dealt with separately.

Franklin and Elk Townships are each located in the southern portion of the state of New Jersey. The two townships are adjacent to one another. Both rest in the southwestern corner of Gloucester County. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania is twenty-six miles to the north and west of this area, a short forty-five minute drive by car.

A large area of land makes up the Township of Franklin. In fact, as far as acreage goes, Franklin Township is one of the biggest townships in the state. The area covered by this township is fifty-five square miles (L. Sharp, personal communication, September 30, 1997). Sixty-five percent of the land is developed with either housing, businesses or roads. Included within the borders of Franklin Township are several towns. They consist of Piney Hollow, Malaga, Franklinville, Iona, Janvier and Star Cross.

The Township of Elk, on the other hand encircles only twenty-one square miles. It is much smaller and less populated than Franklin Township. Taking a ride through the streets of Elk, one would notice the ground being mostly farmland. In fact, 80% of the property in this township is undeveloped. Like Franklin, the land in Elk Township includes several municipalities. The borders of Elk Township encompass the towns of Aura, Ferrell and Hardingville (Iles, 1996).

The populations of both townships are very similar. Eighty-six percent of the residents in Franklin and Elk Townships are Caucasian. Fourteen percent are minority. The minority group consists of African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asians (T. Vanaman, personal communication, September 30, 1997). The population of

Elk Township is four thousand people. Sixteen thousand people live in Franklin Township.

The community surrounding Delsea is at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale. This inference is determined after reviewing several pieces of supporting data. Some of those figures are described here. For example, on a scale of “A” being the lowest socioeconomic status to “J” being the highest socioeconomic status, the New Jersey Department of Education ranks Franklin and Elk Townships at “D” (C. Ferrucci, personal communication, October 22, 1997). In addition, the average combined income for a household in both districts is \$33,000 a year. The typical single family home in the two townships is also worth \$91,000 (C. Ferrucci, personal communication, October 22, 1997). Lastly, the tax rates for both townships are 3.75% based on assessed real estate values. That figure includes local and property taxes. Clearly, the socioeconomic status of this area is not ascertained lightly.

Perhaps the low monetary standards in the district are caused by the types of jobs in the area? Many residents of Franklin Township are employed as trade workers, trained in a certain skill. Most of the people who live in Elk Township are farmers. Very few big businesses and “white collar” jobs are available in the area.

Franklin and Elk Townships are both run by separate township committees. These groups of people are elected at different times once every three years. Each township committee then decides who the mayor of that township will be. The mayor is chosen from the five township committee members by the committee itself. The mayors of Franklin and Elk Townships are *not* elected. The township committees are responsible

for legislation, finances and care for the community (M. Smith, personal communication, October 14, 1997).

Many services are offered to the neighborhoods in both regions. Each township has its own municipal building, police department and fire station. Many churches of various denominations are in both communities. The two townships together have numerous restaurants and parks or sports centers (L. Sharp, personal communication, September 30, 1997). In addition, Franklin Township has a public library and a recycling center.

Both townships are in the midst of change (Iles, 1996). Since the completion of Route 55, travel to and from the Delsea area has become much quicker and more convenient. The townships are growing and attracting many new housing developments. It is anticipated that with the additional homes, more commercial development and businesses will come into the region.

From this intern's perspective, the record of community support for the schools is not good. The author believes this for several reasons. First, many parents view the teachers in a negative light. These people think teachers are a lazy, overpaid and unprofessional group. (Nothing could be further from the truth!)

Second, participation in after school activities is minimal except the sports program. In fact, it is this intern's belief that very often parents are more interested in the athletic program at school than the academic program. Unfortunately, attendance at plays, concerts, fairs, board meetings and sadly, parent conferences is usually slight.

Third, many parents have lost interest in their child's education or are indifferent

toward it. Very often, parents do not help their children with school work or care to check how their child is doing in classes. Some people do not even know when report cards or progress reports are sent home.

Fourth, parents do not value education highly themselves. For instance, only 22% of the parents in the district have a college degree. Some parents think they are too busy to view the importance of working with the teachers.

Fifth, the parents who are involved in the advocacy groups are sometimes the most vocal in complaining about the school district. Parents can become active in parent conferences, the V.I.P., Career Day, Wellness Day, Achievement Night and Project Graduation. It seems, though, the only parents who come regularly into school are the ones who are never satisfied. The school needs to enhance these programs so they can be more instrumental in the daily procedures of the schools.

Lastly, the voters in the townships frequently do not pass the school budget. Although in recent years (2) the budget and referendums have been approved, Delsea voters have a history of not wanting to pay enough money to educate their children thoroughly. A case in point follows.

Delsea Regional High School was built in 1960. It originally housed all the students from Franklin and Elk Townships that were in seventh through twelfth grade. Delsea soon outgrew its facilities and the need for another school was imminent. Unfortunately, from 1974 to 1983, the voters *turned down* several referendums proposing a new middle school. Split sessions were the only option. Students in grades nine through twelve came to school in the morning. The middle school students attended

classes in the afternoon. The high school teachers and the middle school teachers shared the same building. This situation continued for twenty-one years (Iles, 1996)!

Finally, in 1987, the state *mandated* that the Franklinville area build a new middle school for its seventh and eighth grade students. Construction began in 1988, and at last, in September 1989, the new middle school opened (M. Smith, personal communication, October 14, 1997).

Clearly, the parents could do more to show their support for the schools. In addition, the district needs to take a more aggressive stand to encourage and reward parental involvement. This problem has existed for too long without someone doing something about it. This intern is hoping to change all that.

Educational Setting

The Southern Gloucester County Regional School District is the district in which this study takes place. The district is also known as The Delsea Regional High School District because of its proximity to Delsea Drive, Route 47. Two schools are in the district, Delsea Regional High School (grades 9-12) and Delsea Regional Middle School (grades 7-8). Both schools share the same campus. The school district encompasses eighty-five acres on Fries Mill Road in Franklinville, Franklin Township, New Jersey (Iles, 1996).

Delsea Middle School has a huge entrance foyer, a large gymnasium, a cafeteria with a stage, a computer lab and a media center. The building is fully equipped for science, music, art, home economics and industrial arts. The middle school building also contains the board offices and the district's child study team.

The high school has recently added a large addition onto its current building. A gymnasium, media center, science class rooms, auditorium, cafeteria, music room, home economics room, business room, computer lab and administrative offices are all new. All the athletic fields have also been refurbished.

Within the townships of Franklin and Elk are four elementary schools that feed into the Delsea Regional School District. These schools are governed by two different boards of education. All of the school board members in Franklin and Elk Township are elected. The Franklin Township Board of Education has nine members. They control the Mary F. Janvier School (grades K-2), the Caroline Reutter School (grades 3-6) and the Main Road School (grades 3-6). The Elk Township Board of Education also has nine members and they look after the Aura School (K-6). The Delsea Regional School District also has its own Board of Education with nine elected members.

Nine administrators are employed at Delsea. The district commissions a superintendent and an assistant superintendent, who also happens to be the curriculum coordinator. A school business administrator and a director of the child study team are also employed by the school district. The high school has three assistant principals, (two for discipline, one for activities and attendance) and one building principal. The middle school has one principal and one vice principal for the building.

The rest of the staff at Southern Gloucester County Regional School District is as follows. Presently, the district employs ninety-two high school teachers and fifty-seven middle school staff members (T. Vanaman, personal communication, September 30, 1997). The child study team consists of ten members, seven at the high school and three

at the middle school. The guidance department has six counselors, four at the high school and two at the middle school. Each school has a media specialist and a nurse. The district also employs many secretarial workers, teachers' aides, custodians and bus drivers.

The faculty at Delsea Regional is a dedicated and professional bunch. Eighty-seven percent of the teachers have tenure at Delsea. All of the high school teachers have degrees in the department in which they are working. The middle school has 25% of its teachers with degrees in their field. The remaining 75% have elementary education credentials (T. Vanaman, personal communication, September 30, 1997). The intern has noticed through the years that many teachers stay after school or arrive early to enhance the delivery of educational services to the children. Clearly the staff at both schools cares about the students.

The students in the district are unique. Delsea Regional Middle School houses six hundred students. One thousand two hundred students are enrolled in the high school. Fifteen percent of the student population is African American, Hispanic or Asian. Eighteen percent of the district's population is classified as special education (T. Vanaman, personal communication, September 30, 1997). This figure is higher than the state average of 10% (M. Smith, personal communication, October 14, 1997). After completion of high school, 25% of the student population go onto college, 10% go into vocational or technical schools, 15% enlist in the military and 50% go directly to work.

The district offers many different kinds of classes to accommodate all its students. Traditionally, one third of the district's population is enrolled in college preparatory

classes. One third is in the vocational track and one third is in the “general” or non college preparatory program. In addition, the school system offers self-contained special education tracks, honor classes, basic skill subjects and advanced placement courses in varying departments (Iles, 1996).

Besides its curricular courses, the district also has a wide variety of extra curricular activities. Fifteen different sports and thirty various clubs are present at Delsea to involve the students in mind and body (L. Sharp, personal communication, September 30, 1997). The district tries to keep the best interests of the students in mind when it plans the curriculum and activities.

Importance of the Study

The importance of parental involvement in school cannot be over stressed. When parents are involved in their child’s education, the students do better in school (Fredericks & Rasinski, 1989). This fact is well researched. Parents can get involved in their child’s education in many ways. One way parents show their involvement is through parent conferences. Meeting with parents is a good way for teachers to improve student achievement. This study is being conducted so parents can become more involved in conferences. As a result, ties between the home and school should improve and students’ grades should go up. This study is important because, in the end, it enhances the educational services to the children. They will reap the rewards.

Organization of the Study

The remainder of this thesis will consist of four additional chapters. Chapter Two will review the literature on the issues that support the project. This research will

strengthen the importance of improving parent conferences and can help in the design of the program. How the research design is developed will be discussed in Chapter Three. This chapter will address sampling techniques, the actual development of the instrument and the analysis of the data. The findings of the research will be presented in Chapter Four. This chapter will deal with the questions, “What information was found?” and “What did the information mean?” (Capasso, 1997, p. 29). The last chapter, Chapter Five, will focus on the conclusions and implications of the project and ideas for subsequent investigation.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

As the intern conducted research for the review of the literature on parent conferences, three main, repeating themes were uncovered. First, many articles were found dealing with running parent conferences more effectively. Numerous essays gave schools, parents and teachers helpful hints on managing these meetings. Tips and suggestions for conferences were available in the readings. Many of these ideas were incorporated into the intern's project.

Second, many reports were found dealing with the procedures before, during and after conferences. Several articles included sample forms to be filled out by parents and teachers to plan conferences more effectively, summarize the topics discussed during these meetings and record the academic progress made by the student.

Third, the importance of parental involvement was discussed in several different studies. In fact, the significance of parent conferences was addressed in a few of the writings. These articles dealt with how to improve parental involvement in schools, and why the parents' cooperation with the school was valuable.

The first main topic of discussion is how to make conferences better. The

writings on this issue gave the intern many ideas to try to improve conferences at her school. Several of those ideas included tips for parents. Markham (1995) suggested that when parents attend conferences they, "Should write down specific questions about their child's work. Go to the meeting with these issues in mind." Markham (1995) listed several sample questions for parents such as, "Do you know your child's best and worst subjects? Is your child working up to ability? Does your child get along with his or her classmates?" Parents could have taken these ideas and used them during conferences.

Potter (1996) and Hoover (1996) list topics for parents to discuss with teachers in their articles. In his writing, Potter (1996) stressed to parents that they review their child's permanent school record during conferences and talk about the kind of standardized tests the students will be taking. Hoover (1996) gave a brief "survival guide" for parent conferences. Both writers urged parents to ask the teachers how they can help their child prepare for school at home. All of these ideas were good thoughts for parents to ponder.

It should be noted that teachers and schools also need advice on dealing with parent conferences. These topics were addressed in essays written by Riepe (1989), Fredericks & Rasinski (1990), Enoch (1995), Boutte, Keepler, Tyler & Terry (1992), Levy (1992), Foster (1994), Rich (1995), Shaughnessy (1991), Spaulding (1994), and Enoch (1996). All of the above-mentioned authors developed hints for effective conferences.

Enoch had two articles about parent conferences, one from 1995 and one from 1996. In both articles, he discussed nine strategies teachers can use to, "Increase the

value of conferences for both parents and teachers.” Most of these suggestions involved what adults should discuss to have productive conferences. He advocated identifying students’ strengths and weaknesses, displaying student work, setting student goals for home and school and discussing peer cooperation as key points during a conference.

Many of Enoch’s ideas are echoed by Levy (1992) in his article. He also stressed the importance of assessing students’ strengths and weaknesses, setting educational goals and providing time to, “Determine progress toward the goal.”

In their works, Sandy Spaulding (1994) and Linda Riepe (1989) dealt with four ideas for effective parent conferences. The four steps revolved around developing and maintaining open communication with parents before and during conferences. These authors advised teachers to be positive, talk often with parents, involve students in the conference procedures and avoid using too much educational jargon with parents. In each article, the authors included sample “conference planning sheets.” These were forms for pre conference discussion topics and post conference summaries.

In the articles by Shaughnessy (1991), Perl (1995) and Studer (1993-1994) guidelines for conducting productive conferences were given. Ideas that were in all three of these articles included discussing the importance of homework, building active listening skills between the parent and teacher, limiting the hours that children watch television, avoiding the use of educational jargon and establishing a friendly classroom atmosphere.

An interesting article by Fredericks & Rasinski (1990) gave pointers to teachers on what they should *not* do during conferences. The pitfalls of conferences included

talking too much, overusing educational jargon, labeling and making excuses for one's limitations. Fredericks & Rasinski urged professionals to avoid these practices.

“What should a teacher do with a difficult parent during a conference?” This question was answered by Boutte, Keepler, Tyler & Terry (1992) in their article. Scenarios of five hypothetical parents were given and suggestions for dealing with them were also given. One important thing the writers stressed to remember, if a conference is going awry, postpone the conference until cooler heads prevail.

Foster (1994) described what the school can do to increase the odds of parents attending conferences. She advocated providing refreshments and cozy meeting places for conferences. She also suggested arranging child care and transportation for parents who need these services. The latter two ideas are being considered at the intern's school for future conferences. It is anticipated that they will be implemented.

In her candid article, Rich (1995), “Answered teachers' questions and shared ideas for establishing a positive relationship with parents.” She used a question/answer format to address the concerns of teachers who have written into Instructor Magazine.

One other idea that has been consistent in the literature was schools should adopt clear policies for before conference activities, during conference activities and after conference activities. The intern has attempted to use some of these “during conference” ideas with the anticipation of developing procedures for “before” and “after” suggestions in the future. Sicley (1993), Gelfer & Perkins (1987), Seldin (1991), Strudler (1993), Shalaway (1993) and Meyers & Pawlas (1989) contributed to the pre and post conference ideas. Their recommendations included sending home thank you notes to parents after

attending conferences, reviewing a child's background information before conferences, documenting all stages of the conference, and calling home as often as possible.

The article by Meyers & Pawlas (1989) deserves special mention. In their writing, these two authors focused on things teachers can do ahead of time, before a conference to have a more effective session. They urged both educators and parents to prepare questions to ask and list topics to discuss before the actual meeting. Some of these questions included, "How does my child behave in class? How does he or she get along with other students? Can I see a sample of their work?" (Meyers & Pawlas, 1989). The authors also suggested teachers review a child's school record to refresh themselves of a student's situation. They advocated the use of reading past teachers' comments and prior test scores to know more about a child before the parent comes. Lastly, they stressed the importance of a teacher knowing a child's *social* background to answer and ask questions more thoroughly.

How to conduct post conference activities was the main focus of the article written by Shalaway (1993). The importance of a post conference summary sheet or form that both parents and teachers read, write, revise and sign was explained in her writing. This summary sheet detailed what was discussed at the conference, what comments were made, what goals were set for the child, and how those goals will be followed up on or evaluated. A space for everyone's opinion of the conference and their performance during the conference was also provided. Teachers also made private notes on the conference sheet expressing what information they have learned about the child to help them teach that youngster better.

The value of parental involvement and parent conferences was a third topic that was heavily emphasized in the literature. Many articles were found to strengthen the idea that parents are very important to their child's education. All of the sources listed below, reinforced this intern's belief that if parent conferences are improved, children achieve more in school. "Research has shown time and again that parental involvement in instructional activities is beneficial and can be linked to student achievement" (Fisher, 1994).

A relationship between parental involvement and student achievement has existed for years. This idea has been stated in articles by Childs (1991), The Kentucky State Department of Education (1991), Burby (1997) and Aiex (1996). All of these studies emphasized the importance of strong parent and teacher communication. These sources focused upon, "A direct correlation between student achievement and parental support and involvement" (Childs, 1991).

One of these articles, written by Nola Kortner Aiex, deserved a closer look. In their writing, the author, "Reviewed the research on how to increase parental involvement in middle schools and presented several programs already in use at various school districts" (Aiex, 1996). Four interactive parent and student activities were given in the report. These ideas revolved around a creative homework approach, how to read to your children effectively, dramatics and a reading club.

Other articles from the literature dealt with *how* to get parents involved in the schools. Several writings by Carey & Farris (1996), Barclay & Boone (1996), Batey (1996), Barnett (1995), Wilmore (1995), Butler (1992), Leyser (1985) and Warner (1991)

all addressed the aspect of increasing parental involvement and communication in schools. Some ideas the intern included in her project were providing mailings and newsletters home describing school activities, sending articles on the importance of home and school cooperation and surveying opinions designed to improve parental involvement. These articles were used to give the intern insight for the project and to discover other ways of reaching parents.

Two of these studies, one by Carey & Farris (1996), the other by Butler (1992), greatly influenced the intern's project. Both groups conducted research on methods of parental involvement using data collection instruments. These instruments were reviewed when the intern considered her data collection procedures. Carey & Farris (1996) sent a survey to more than 800 elementary and middle schools nationwide. The staff of these institutions was asked to list the kinds activities they used to encourage parental involvement and the value or importance of these plans. They were also questioned as to what extent the parents participated in these programs.

In the Butler (1992) report, a questionnaire was sent to more than 400 parents, 200 teachers and 100 principals in the Mississippi area. Respondents were given a list of parental involvement strategies. They were then asked to choose the five most important strategies for their school from the list. They were also requested to indicate which strategies were currently being used in their school. Not surprisingly, parent conferences ranked number one on both studies.

Clearly parent conferences are valued by schools and homes alike. Parent conferences are an excellent way to get parents involved in their child's education and in

their lives. Why? Ultimately, grades go up and kids do better in school when parents are involved.

Chapter 3

Design of the Study

Chapter Three focuses on the research design of the study. This topic is broken down into the following five areas: describing the general design of the research, explaining the instruments used for the research and how they were created, depicting the sample and how it was selected, describing how the data were collected and summarizing the data analysis plan.

Description of the Research Design

This project was designed to increase attendance at parent conferences. This goal was attained through the completion of several steps. The first step was to take attendance at the initial sessions of parent conferences (October 6 and 7, 1997). On those nights, parents were asked to complete a survey. Questions were asked on the survey that dealt with how conferences were run, what could be done to improve them and what parents thought of them.

The second step was the tallying of the questionnaires. The surveys were read by the intern, two teachers, one parent and the principal. The group then compiled onto one long list, all the possible suggestions from the completed surveys. The committee then

discussed the feasibility of each recommendation. Ideas were eliminated due to their expense, lack of interest, lack of need, or implausibility of implementation. A plan, a final list of suggestions, was created to improve conferences.

The third step involved the next night of parent conferences (December 17, 1997). Attendance was taken and the new ideas were implemented at the second set of conferences. The changes, and the conference dates were advertised in three local newspapers. A “tip” sheet for successful conferences was sent to all the teachers and parents in the district along with a summary of recent research confirming the value of parent conferences. These memos reminded parents and teachers why conferences were important, and how to make the most of these meetings.

Next, attendance was taken at the third set of conferences (March 11). The changes were still in place. During the evening, a survey was given asking parents for their suggestions and opinions of the changes. The results were tabulated and the five committee members read over them.

The intern intends to judge the success of the project based upon the attendance figures at conferences. It is anticipated that 10% more parents should attend conferences between the first and second sets of meetings. By the third set of parent conferences, attendance should be at a minimum level of 25% total.

Design and Development of the Research Instruments

The intern designed all the surveys, questionnaires, press releases and memos for this project. The questions asked on each data collection device were thought of by the intern after careful consideration of the goals of the project, opinions of various

professional educators and a comprehensive review of the literature. Items on the surveys were thought of logically by the intern. No examples of surveys were available from the literature. However, ideas for questions were taken from the writings.

Sample & Sampling Techniques

A sample of people was used for this research study. The sample was taken from the parents and teachers in the district. These people made up the entire population from which data could have been collected. Not all parents and teachers in the district contributed to the data, although all were asked to participate. The sample was determined by attendance at conferences. Any parent showing up to conferences was given a survey, and therefore participated in this project. The only data collected were from the parents who showed up to conferences and completed a survey. No parent in attendance was declined participation. Similarly, any data collection that involved the teachers, all staff were involved. Teachers were not singled out for non-participation for any reason.

Data Collection Approach

A tally sheet was used to take the parents' attendance during the first conferences sessions. When these sheets were evaluated, the percentage of attendance was calculated. Unfortunately, since parents were left to sign in on their own for the beginning conferences, attendance was light and not fully recorded at the first session. Due to a lack of participation on the parents' part, the intern changed this procedure for the remaining set of conferences. (First the intern recollected data directly from the teachers regarding who was in attendance during the first conference sessions.) The intern asked students to

sign parents in as they entered the building. The teachers were also asked to take attendance in their rooms. These processes allowed more accurate data to be recorded for the remaining sets of conferences.

The survey the parents completed at the first set of conferences was used to help the intern come up with ideas to improve attendance at conferences. Parents were asked to list their overall rating of conferences, what they liked about conferences, how conferences could be improved, and what the intern's school should do to get more parents to attend conferences.

The survey at the third conference night was used to evaluate the intern's project. Parents were given a list of the changes made during the year regarding conferences. They were asked to evaluate those changes and to give their opinion of the changes. Space was also provided for parents to give more suggestions.

In both cases of the surveys, the parents were asked to express their opinion by writing answers to several questions on a sheet of paper. Pens and pencils were provided. Surveys were handed out by some of the intern's students and were available at the desk in the central office. The questionnaires were collected in labeled boxes in each hallway and in the intern's mailbox. Announcements were made every hour to remind parents to fill out a survey and sign in.

Data Analysis Plan

Attendance figures were totaled for each night of parent conferences. That data was compared with the total number of available parents who had children in the middle school. Percentages were figured and the totals for each conference session were

compared. These numbers were used as data for the evaluation for the project.

Chapter 4

Presentation of the Research Findings

Introduction

The focus of the research for this project was to increase attendance at parent conference sessions, and in the end, to make conferences more effective and meaningful for teachers and parents. Therefore, the data collected during this project focused upon the parents and teachers from the intern's school.

Attendance data was collected on the first two sessions of parent conferences on October 6 and 7. During those nights, a survey was given out to teachers and parents asking them for ideas on improving conferences. Some changes were then made to parent conferences. Information regarding attendance was then taken on December 17, the next night of parent conferences. On the last night of conferences, held on March 11, parental attendance was taken and another survey was given to parents and teachers to see if they approved of the changes. Again they were asked what the school could do to improve conferences.

All of the data collected were used to improve conferences or to decide if attendance at conferences did indeed increase. The information was also used to assess

the effectiveness of this project and to discover areas for future study.

Data Collected at the First Conference

On the first night of conferences, held October 6, 1997, the parents and/or guardians of 110 children attended parent conferences. On that date, the enrollment for the student target population was set at 614 seventh and eighth grade students. Thus, 17.9% of the students' parents or guardians attended the conference.

The next session of conferences was held the following night, October 7, 1997. On that date, the parents and/or guardians of 96 students were present at conferences. This information transfers into 15.6% of the students' parents or guardians attending.

At both sessions, parents were asked to record their attendance at a sign in desk. The intern believed many parents did not do this so she asked the teachers for a list of the parents they saw those nights. The master attendance list was then updated and a new policy was started for accurately recording parental attendance at future conferences.

Parent and Teacher Survey to Improve Conferences

On the first two nights of conferences, the intern collected ideas on improving conferences from the parents and teachers. See Appendix A for a copy of the survey. The surveys were on tables at the entrance to each wing. The surveys were advertised with large, bright signs. The parents and teachers were asked to list suggestions for increasing attendance at conferences. The surveys were returned to collection boxes in each wing. The intern then tabulated the results and discussed them with the P.R.I.D.E. committee. The group then decided which ideas were possible for implementation.

The first question on the parent/teacher survey involved rating the effectiveness of

parent conferences at the intern's school. A scale of one through five was used to record the opinions of the teachers and parents (one being "least effective," five being "most effective" and six being "no comment"). The results are shown in Table 1. Clearly, the teachers have a more negative impression of the effectiveness of parent conferences.

Question number two on the survey asked what people liked about conferences. Ninety-one percent of the respondents wrote something similar to liking the chance to meet the parent or teacher face to face to discuss a student's problems. A variety of other answers were also given, but none were statistically significant.

The next question asked what the school could do to improve conferences. The respondents could write as many ideas as they wanted. Answers from the respondents ranged from putting chairs in the hallway, limiting the amount of time for each teacher, offering different times and scheduling different and more numerous nights to have the meetings. See Table 2 for a summary of this question's responses.

The remaining two items on the survey were, "Why do some parents not attend conferences?" and "How can we get those parents to conferences?" Those questions were put on the survey to see how the intern could further study conferences, and target the parents that frequently do not attend the meetings. These items gave the intern ideas for future exploration (Chapter 5).

The last item on the survey was an item to check off, teacher or parent. In all thirty-seven out of a possible 206 parents responded (18%) and fifteen out of fifty-one teachers answered the survey (29.4%). The intern was disappointed in the lack of responses and wants to address how to improve that problem in Chapter 5.

Between the October and December Conferences

During the time between the first two conference nights in October and the next night of conferences in December, the intern read and tallied the results of the parent/teacher surveys. She then discussed the suggestions with the P.R.I.D.E. committee. Ideas were exchanged, and some ideas were thrown out because of their infeasibility. Some ideas were embellished. The committee selected a list of changes that they thought were the most achievable and effective. See Appendix B for a list of the changes made to parent conferences. The night of December 17 was set as the target date for the new changes for the conferences. The intern (and the committee, when appropriate) designed the December conference session around the changes.

Data Collected at the Second Conference

On the third night of conferences, held December 17, 1997, the parents and/or guardians of 136 students attended the conference. The enrollment for the student target population was set at 617 students on this date. Thus, 22.0% of the students' parents or guardians attended the conference. Considering that this conference session was held the week before Christmas on a rainy night, the intern thought attendance was good. Attendance had raised a minimum of 18.6% since the last conference.

Data Collected at the Third Conference

On March 11, 1998, the fourth night of conferences was held. Between the December and March conferences, only one change was added. Child care services were provided for parents with small children. Also, during this last night of conferences,

another parent and teacher survey was given out asking people for their opinion of the changes made to the meetings.

On March 11, the parents or guardians of 202 students attended conferences. The enrollment for the student target population was 620 students. Therefore, 32.3% of the students' parents or guardians were present at the last conference session. Attendance at conferences had raised a minimum of 44.6% between the October and March parent conferences and had risen a total of 31.9% between the December and March conferences. See Table 3 for a comparison of the conference attendance.

Survey on the Changes

A survey was given out to the teachers and parents on the night of March 11, 1998. (See Appendix C for a copy of the survey.) The surveys were on tables at the entrance to each wing. The surveys were advertised with large, bright signs. The parents and teachers were asked to give their opinion of the changes made to parent conferences. The surveys were returned to collection boxes in each wing. In all 33.3% (17 out of 51) of the teachers responded and 6.4% (13 out of 202) of the parents filled out the survey. It is clear to the intern that more responses are needed for the survey to be valid. This problem will be addressed in Chapter 5.

Question number one on the parent/teacher survey was to check which changes were the most effective. Respondents were allowed to check as many boxes as they wanted. The responses the parents checked the most were; sending invitations and reminders (10 votes-76.9%), chairs in the halls (8 votes-61.5%), ice cream party and the computer grade sheets (6 votes each-46.1%). Student greeters and press releases were

also highly favored. Among the teachers, computer reports (11 votes-64.7%), press releases (10 votes-58.8%), refreshments (9 votes-52.9%), chairs in the halls (9 votes-52.9%) and invitations (8 votes-47.1%) were the highest frequency responses. The ice cream contest was also viewed upon favorably by the teachers with 7 votes (41.2%). Clearly, both sets of respondents agreed on which changes were the most effective at increasing attendance at conferences. Please see Table 4 and Table 5 for a summary of the responses to question number one.

The second question on the survey asked how the people liked the changes made to the conference sessions. One hundred percent of the responses to this question were favorable. The last question on the survey asked once more for suggestions on improving conferences further. Again the parents repeated their desire for adhering to the five minute time limit per teacher. One parent also requested an additional night of conferences and two parents requested that *all* teachers be required to attend conferences. Most parents left this question blank.

The teachers had a variety of responses to this question. However, most answers were not stated by more than one respondent. Some answers were repeated. Five teachers requested that conferences be held at a different time of day (half day sessions), and four suggested scheduling conferences so each parent has a specific time slot. Two teachers wanted the school to stick to the five minute rule and two others suggested sending “thank you” notes or coupons for local businesses to parents who do attend. These ideas will be considered for future study in Chapter 5.

Findings

Historically speaking, attendance at conferences generally *decreases* as the school year progresses. The intern knows this from experience and personal records she has kept for more than eight years. So any *increase* in conference attendance is a good sign. Considering the fact that this was the first attempt at improving conference attendance at the intern's school, the increase in numbers is a good start.

Unfortunately, the 10% increase in percentage points (as stated in the intern's research proposal) between the attendance at the first conference sessions and the second conference session was not realized. In addition, 25% of the parents did not attend conferences in December as anticipated. However, attendance was more than 25% by the last session of parent conferences.

The intern does not want to be too aggressive or unrealistic regarding this project. She is aware that changes take a while to "sink in." She will continue her work for a minimum of one additional year to carry out more ideas, and she feels confident the attendance numbers will continue to increase.

Conclusion

Eventually, the intern would like to see 100% of the parents attend *all* school functions, especially parent conferences. Until that time, she will continue to conduct research and make improvements. The next section, Chapter 5, will focus upon the areas for further study regarding this project.

Chapter 5

Conclusions, Implications and Further Study

After completing the project on parent conferences, the intern came to many conclusions. Among these judgments were; conference attendance increased, response to the surveys was limited, preparing for conferences was time consuming and changes were not always welcome. Overall, the results were broken down into three categories, conclusions for the study, the intern and the school. The intern developed some ideas for further study that will also be addressed later in this chapter.

Conclusions and Implications of the Study

The first and most major conclusion reached by the intern at the completion of this project was attendance at parent conferences did indeed increase. The number of parents coming to the meetings rose from 17.9% in October to 22% in December to 32.3% in March. The only changes made to parent conferences were the ones that the intern implemented. Is the increase in attendance strictly due to the intern's project? Further study on this question is needed. However, the intern would be hard pressed to come up with an alternative reason for the increase.

The second conclusion reached during the research of this project was the teachers

at the intern's school viewed conferences in a more negative light than the parents. For example, when asked the question on the October survey about the effectiveness of conferences, the parents answered quite differently than the teachers. The parents responded with an average of 4.25 and the teachers replied with an average of 2.93 (on a scale of one to five, one being the least effective, five being the most effective.)

The intern would like to explore the reasons for this difference. Maybe the teachers are less positive because they are *forced* to be in school those nights. Maybe the teachers do not want to have parent conferences in the evening after working a full day. Maybe the teachers feel conferences are not worthwhile because the educators do not usually see the parents they really *need* to see those nights. Clearly further study is needed on this point.

In general, the teachers and parents agreed on which changes would be the most effective at increasing attendance at conferences. This statement makes conclusion number three. Both groups thought scheduling specific conference times for each parent and teacher would bring the most people to school. The teachers and parents also agreed that scheduling different times of the day, morning, afternoon and evening sessions would be effective at raising attendance. However, the parents clearly wanted the school to stress a time limit of five minutes to each conference with an individual teacher. The teachers did not request this idea much (probably because the teachers do not have to wait in line on conference nights.) More than likely, it never occurred to the teachers that this was a problem.

The teachers and parents agreed as well on what conference changes they liked the

best and found the most beneficial. Having chairs in the hall for parents waiting in line, sending out invitations and reminders, publicizing the conference dates in the local newspapers, providing refreshments and computerized grade sheets were all changes that rated highest between both groups of people. It is apparent to this intern that the views of the parents and teachers are far more similar than dissimilar.

Conclusions and Implications for the Intern's Leadership

Several ideas came to mind at the end of this project regarding the intern's leadership ability. One area of growth for the intern was about implementing changes. The intern concluded that for *any* desired change, one should completely research the need for the change and how the change process will be made *before implementing anything*. The opinions and "blessings" of the people the change affects are wanted at all costs. Discuss ideas with the teachers, administrators, board members, students and parents first. Ask their permission if possible. Get their opinions and suggestions. It is surprising how helpful and cooperative people can be when they feel they are being included. Many glitches can be solved ahead of time through cooperation.

The intern also concluded preparing for conferences cannot wait until the last minute. Forms must be created, copied and displayed in the right spot or given to the correct people ahead of time. Planning and setting up for the night of conferences, takes time. Starting early is a wise idea, as well as delegating some jobs to other staff members, parents and students.

The intern was disappointed with the lack of replies to the surveys given out during the school year. The number of parents and teachers filling out surveys was fewer

than the intern had anticipated. Why were responses so light? The intern concluded that the surveys must be made shorter and easier to complete. The questions on the surveys should be minimal and written in a language that is easy to understand. No confusion is allowed. (In fact, the intern concluded that several people should “proofread” the survey before handing it out to the general public.)

The surveys must also be easy to pick up and return with clear directions. In the future, the intern will provide multiple copies of surveys to the teachers and ask them to distribute the documents to the parents they see. This way, more parents will get a survey and hopefully, more parents will answer one. The intern also anticipates mailing surveys to the parents who do not attend conferences. She will ask them why they did not come to the meetings and what the school can do to encourage their support/ participation.

Also the intern will *hand deliver* the teacher’s personal copy of the survey (with a plea to complete it) instead of putting it in their mailboxes. She has concluded face-to-face talk is the most effective form of communication. She will also keep better records of teachers who do and do not reply to surveys. “Friendly” reminders will be sent out (face-to-face) to those who do not respond.

Conclusions and Implications for the Organization

The most obvious conclusion for the school organization was that a procedure was followed for a set of changes regarding parent conferences. It is believed that parental attendance at conferences increased at least in part of, if not as a direct result of these changes. However, the school needs to develop a policy with regards to increasing parental attendance and participation in school activities, specifically parent conferences.

This policy will make it easier in the future to determine if an increase or decrease in attendance is due to the changes or not. Also, room for improvement clearly still exists with regards to parent conferences, their attendance and other areas of the home-school relationship.

The institution also needs to develop a way to get more responses from the people who characteristically do not attend meetings at school. We need to know why these people do not participate, and what the school can do to get them involved. The school needs to take further steps to reach these people on a personal, face-to-face level to get their participation. The district must develop a procedure for contacting these people through the mail, phone calls or visits from neighbors, teachers, administrators and other parents. The school needs to set up a policy that holds people accountable for their action (or inaction.)

Further Study

The intern feels another year of study on this project would be beneficial. She will carry on with the change process, continuing the current changes and adding any new ideas for at least one additional school year. In the next year, the intern anticipates finding an answer to the following questions.

1. Why are the teachers more negative toward conferences than the parents? What can the school do to change that?
2. Regarding the parent conference surveys, what can the school do to encourage more responses - from the parents in attendance, the parents not in attendance and the teachers?

3. Did attendance at conferences increase due to the intern's project changes or to another factor?
4. What other changes can be made to increase attendance at parent conferences?
5. How will half-day sessions affect parent conference attendance?
6. How will scheduling conferences affect parental attendance?
7. How will additional conference days affect parental attendance?
8. Is transportation to parent conferences a problem for some people?
How many would benefit from a transit system (using school buses) for that night?
9. Would a phone chain, run by the school's V.I.P. group, reminding people to go to conferences affect parental attendance?
10. How can the school increase attendance at other school sponsored activities?
11. What else can the district do to improve the relationship between the home and the school?

Obviously, the intern still has many unanswered questions and unresolved ideas that she will need more time in which to progress. With hard work and a little luck, she will find the answers. Our children and students are worth it. They deserve the best educators and parents can give them.

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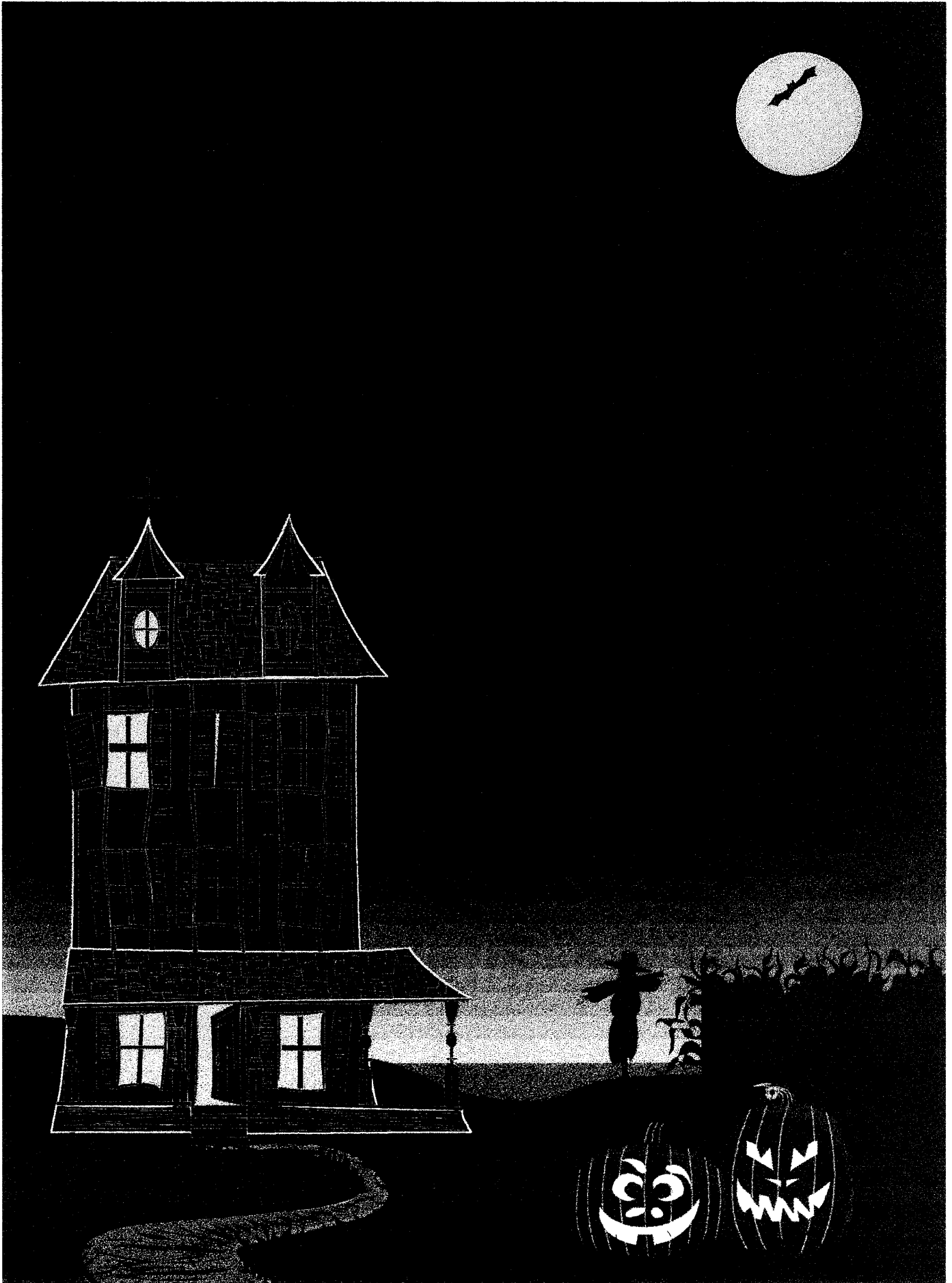
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Appendix A
October Parent Conference Survey



Thank you for completing this survey on parent conferences!

Your answers will be confidential and your participation is optional. Return this form when you can to one of the boxes outside Science Room #1 or in the lobby on the front desk. Thanks!

1. On the scale below, how would you rate parent conferences at Delsea Middle School?
(Circle one.)

1	2	3	4	5	6
(least effective)				(most effective)	(no opinion)

2. What is most effective about parent conferences at Delsea Middle School? (What are we doing right?)

3. How can we improve conferences at our school?

4. Why do you think some parents do not attend conferences?

5. How can we get those parents here for conferences?

6. Check one: ☐ Parent ☐ Teacher

7. Comments:

Appendix B
Changes Made to Parent Conferences

Appendix B

Changes Made to Parent Conferences:

For December 17, 1998

1. Five folding chairs were put outside each classroom door for parents waiting in line.
2. Coffee and refreshments were available in the cafeteria.
3. The V.I.P. had a bake sale on conference nights.
4. Name tags were provided for all staff members and parents.
5. A contest was started. The homeroom with the highest percentage of parents attending conferences wins an ice cream party. The seventh grade math classes tabulated the winners.
6. Personal invitations (reminders) were sent out to each household (with students) in the district.
7. Tips for effective conferences were sent to all teachers and parents in the district.
8. Articles and quotes from expert researchers stressing the importance of conferences were copied and sent to parents.
9. Press releases stressing the changes and the conference date were written by the intern, sent to three local papers, and were published.
10. Attendance was taken. Students greeted parents as they entered the school and recorded their name and the student they were representing.

For March 11, 1998

11. Child care services were provided for any potty trained youngster under the age of nine. An adult and six student council members were in charge.
12. The changes from the December conference were still in effect also.

Appendix C

March Parent Conference Survey



Thank you for completing this survey on parent conferences!

Please take a minute to fill out this survey. Return it to one of the collection boxes (in C Wing or the lobby) or to my mailbox in the central office. Thanks again!

- Jill Bryfogle

Date: March 11, 1998

Parent _____ Teacher _____

1. The following items were added to parent conferences during this school year. Check the changes that you liked the most or you found the most effective.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> refreshments | <input type="checkbox"/> invitations/reminders |
| <input type="checkbox"/> computerized grade sheets | <input type="checkbox"/> student greeters |
| <input type="checkbox"/> tips on successful conferences | <input type="checkbox"/> chairs in the halls |
| <input type="checkbox"/> child care services | <input type="checkbox"/> parental attendance |
| <input type="checkbox"/> surveys on improving conferences | <input type="checkbox"/> ice cream party contest |
| <input type="checkbox"/> name tags | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> research on the importance of conferences | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> conference dates announced in local paper | |

2. What is your opinion of the changes? Did you like them?

3. Do you have any new ideas or suggestions to improve conferences in the future? (We are still working on changes for next school year.)

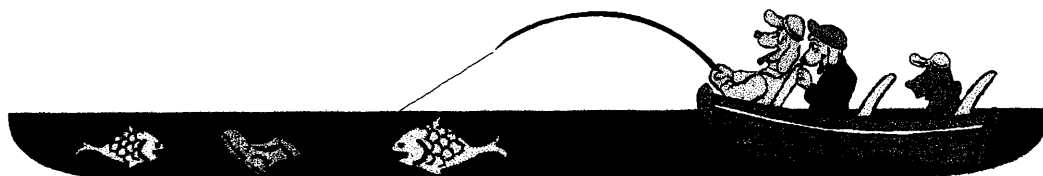
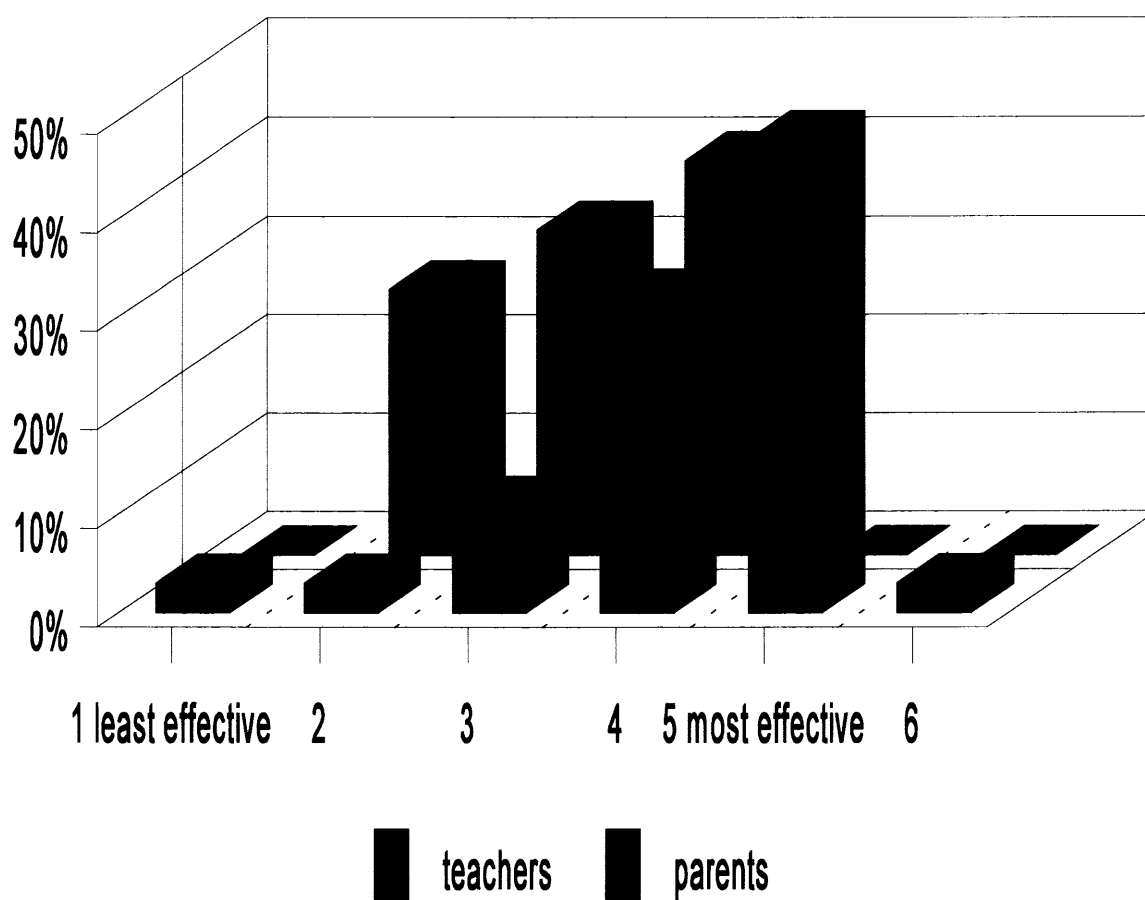


Table 1

Survey - Oct. 6 & 7: question 1



teachers	0%	27%	33%	40%	0%	0%
parents	3%	3%	11%	32%	48%	3%

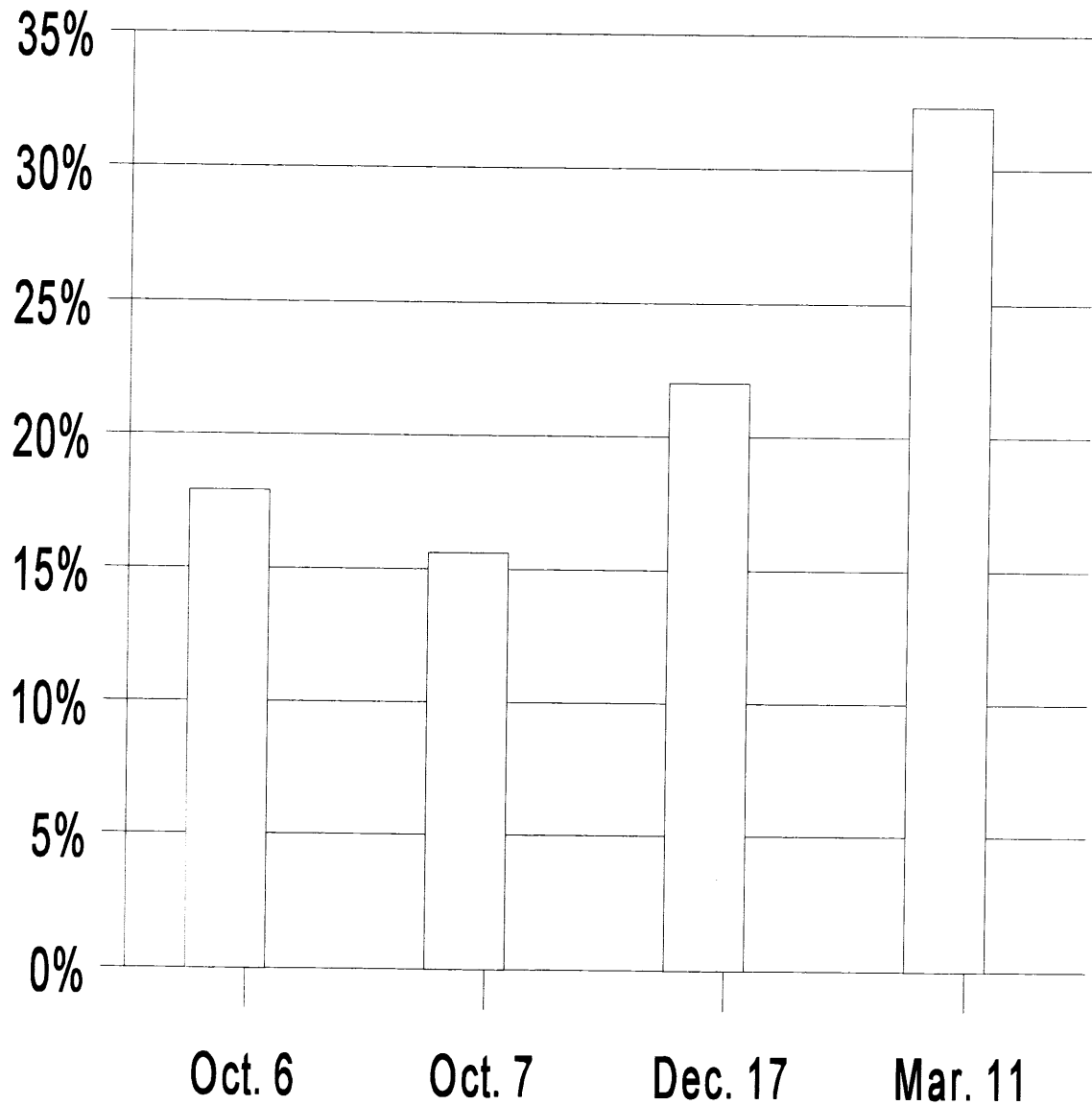
Table 2
Improving Conferences

IDEA	% T	% P
1. chairs in the hall	6.6	8
2. different times of the day	53	16.2
3. reminders in the mail	6.7	2.7
4. scheduling individual times	47	27
5. five minute limit per teacher	0	51.4
6. tip sheet on conference ideas	0	8
7. name tags	0	2.7

T=teacher P=parent

Table 3

Parent Conference Attendance



Percent	17.9%	15.6%	22%	32.3%
Date	Oct. 6	Oct. 7	Dec. 17	Mar. 11

Table 4
Parent Responses to March Survey
March 11, 1998 - Question 1

<u>Change</u>	<u>Percent Response</u>
refreshments	23.1
computer sheets	46.2
tip sheets	7.7
child care	23.1
surveys	30.8
dates in paper	38.5
invitations	76.9
greeters	38.5
chairs	61.5
attendance	30.8
ice cream	46.1
name tags	7.7

Table 5
Teacher Responses to March Survey
March 11, 1998 - Question 1

<u>Change</u>	<u>Percent Response</u>
refreshments	52.9
computer sheets	64.7
tip sheets	0
child care	23.5
surveys	17.6
dates in paper	58.8
invitations	52.9
greeters	35.3
chairs	52.9
attendance	35.3
ice cream	41.2
name tags	29.4

Biographical Data

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