Strengthening Counselor-Teacher-Family Connections: The Family-School Collaborative Consultation Project

A 3-year project of school-wide change undertaken by a team of school counselors, administrators and counselor educators was initiated to create strong working relationships among a school’s counselors, teachers, and students’ families. We delineate the goals and history of this consultation project and give detailed examples of our intervention strategies to encourage other counselors to assume a leadership role in strengthening family-teacher-counselor connections.

Despite the consistent, cumulative findings that home environments and out-of-school time contribute powerfully to children’s learning, few teachers routinely include parents in planning or decision making about their children’s learning and development. Instead most teachers believe that they are exclusively responsible for student learning in their classroom, and that parents and counselors should be kept at a distance and only involved if the teacher cannot resolve a student’s difficulties. Regrettably, not only do these practices result in teachers feeling isolated and unsupported, but waiting until students have problems severe enough to warrant an invitation to parents to come in often leaves parents feeling alienated and blamed by school staff.

How might counselors and teachers break from this tradition and develop close working relationships with each other and with students’ families? Can counselors take the lead in accomplishing this when our own experience as counselors and counselor educators is situated in a set of culturally prescribed roles which do not fully prepare us for this leadership role? In this article we describe our experience as counselors and counselor educators working to build stronger connections with teachers and students’ families in a K-12 school. We first describe the initial beliefs about family-school interaction and counselor-teacher interaction held by the school staff. We then describe the history of our consultation project to illustrate the development of a model of organizational change in the family-teacher-counselor relationship system. Finally, we describe our project goals and primary intervention strategies and give detailed and concrete examples of interventions to encourage other school counselors to invest in similar efforts to develop close working relationships with teachers and with the families of their students.

RETHINKING COUNSELOR-TEACHER-FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Educators have long recognized the importance of families in influencing students’ academic achievement. However, it was not until the late 1980s and 1990s that more systematic attention was given to how educators might work with families to enhance student learning and achievement. This new interest in families was generated by the results of research on the families of preschool and school-age children (Clark, 1983; Dornbush, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom, 1993; Snow, Bames, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991). This research demonstrated that families appear to be the crucial ingredient in determining whether a child succeeds in gaining an education.

As a result of these findings, a variety of innovative practices focused on involving families in the teaching and learning process were developed by early childhood educators working with low-income families (B rofenbrenner, 1974; Davison, 1998; Scott-Jones, 1987), by educators working with language-minority children (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Delpit, 1995), and by educators attempting to restructure and reorganize schools (Comer, Haynes, Joyce, & Ben-Avi, 1996; Davies, Burch, & Johnson, 1992; Senge et al., 2000). Coupled with this growing interest in the family’s role in children’s academic success were increased pressures placed on schools by the larger political-cultural context to include families in educational decision making. For example, the U.S. Congress passed a law requiring that “by the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parent involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and
academic growth of children" (National Educational Goals Panel, 1999). To comply with Title I mandates under the Improving America’s Strengthening Counselor Connections Schools Act (U.S. Congress, 1999), administrators are now required to specify in district plans how they will consult with caregivers. Thus, federal legislation defined an active role for caregivers in educational decision making for their children and for the community at large. Implicit in this legislation is recognition of the interdependence of home and school in socializing children (Coleman, 1987; U.S. Department of Education, 1997) and of the importance of consistency and harmony between these two contexts.

As a result of these changed expectations, many educators have begun to rethink how they might be involved with students and their families so as to improve student learning and achievement. As part of the educational team, school counselors are being called upon to become leaders and advocates in influencing the social, cultural, and political dynamics of schools which undergird family-school relationships and promote students’ academic success (Jackson et al., 2002; House & Scars, 2002; Martin, 2002). This new leadership role for counselors and counselor educators is taking a variety of forms. One direction is to strengthen the connections families have with educators to maximize the resources available to promote children’s learning (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Taylor & Adelman, 2000). Rather than interact with families merely on an “as-needed” basis, counselors and other educators are consciously examining the beliefs undergirding family-school relations and are proposing a co-expert or collaborative paradigm to replace the “sole-expert” model that has traditionally characterized family-school relationships (Epstein, 1995; Swap, 1993; Weiss & Edwards, 1992). In the traditional model, the educator’s role is that of “sole expert or authority” who assesses students’ needs, identifies concerns or problems that merit attention, decides what type of instruction or solution is necessary, and determines how students and their families should be involved. In this sole expert/authority model, educators are expected to assume unilateral or dominant roles in educational decision making with a philosophy of “doing to” or “doing for” students and families. In contrast, in a co-expert or partnership model educators “work with” students and their families together to identify resources for taking action to solve children’s problems and to celebrate their learning. Other differences between these two paradigms include the focus of the relationship; the roles of the educator, student, and family members; the nature of the relationship, including the goal toward which it is directed; the nature of the activities; and the expected outcomes (see Table 1).

**PROJECT HISTORY**

In 1999, two counselor educators at a large, southeastern university and an administrator and two counselors from a university laboratory school formed a team with the goal of creating stronger working connections between counselors, teachers, and student’s families. The efforts of this team grew into a 3-year consultation project that focused on bringing about organizational change using a collaborative consultation approach (Kampwirth, 2003). The first author served as the leader of this team with 30% of her academic assignment at the school. In this capacity she consulted with counselors and teachers in the development of specific family-school intervention activities, coordinated the development of training materials, and supervised the ongoing interdepartmental collaboration of counselors and teachers at the school with counselor education graduate students assigned to the project. The second author served both as a project initiator and a clinical and research supervisor to graduate students involved in the project. As director of the school, the fourth author was committed to creating a strong school leadership team in which the school counselor plays an integral role. Thus she employed two certified school counselors who were doctoral students by splitting a full-time counseling position and assigned each responsibility for serving the needs of students, families, and instructional team members at two grade levels. The third author served as the sixth and seventh grade counselor and participated on the sixth and seventh grade instructional team and the guidance department team and was assigned to the school on a half-time basis.

The primary goal of the project was to foster a mindset in school staff of partnership and collaboration with students’ families to enhance student learning. Following the example of Weiss and Edwards (1992), we defined “family-school collaboration as a cooperative process of planning and problem solving involving school staff, parents, children, and significant others to maximize resources for students’ academic achievement and social-emotional development” (p. 215). The significance of this goal was that family or parent involvement by itself was not the primary aim of our project. Too often parent involvement programs merely seek to bring in family members without considering how they are linked to the educational development of the students. We sought to tie family-school collaboration inextricably to the educational aims of the school.

The site of this change effort was a K–12 university research school located in the southeastern United States attended by 1,205 students whose ethnic composition was 62% white, 24% black, 10% Hispanic, and the remaining 1% Asian or American.
### Table 1. Comparison of Authority-Client and Collaborative Approaches to Family-School Relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authority-Client Approach</th>
<th>Collaborative Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose of Interaction:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Purpose of Interaction:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solve the student’s academic or social problem.</td>
<td>Foster a process of joint planning and problem-solving between the family and school to maximize the resources for children’s learning and social-emotional development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educator’s Role:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Educator’s Role:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert who does “to” or “for” the family, serving as the central decision maker or problem solver.</td>
<td>Professional working “with,” not doing “to”; resource person who shares leadership and power with the family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student’s Role:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student’s Role:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often excluded from family-school interaction or has passive role; assumed not to know what he or she needs.</td>
<td>Active role in all family-school activities and in determining own progress, problems, and solutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caregiver’s Role:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Caregiver’s Role:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often passive recipient of “service” or “activity” that is defined by school professional.</td>
<td>Active role in all family-school activities; seen as capable of deciding how to contribute to student’s learning or solve student’s problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nature of the Relationship:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Nature of the Relationship:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant, sometimes adversarial; frequently with overt or covert blaming by each party.</td>
<td>Cooperative, non-blaming atmosphere created to promote problem solving.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Goal:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Goal:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For the two parties to have contact only when there is a problem to be resolved.</td>
<td>To design opportunities to get to know one another and establish a partnership to support children’s learning and development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nature of the Activities:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Nature of the Activities:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School staff assesses the problem and prescribes the necessary cure; all are expected to be compliant with the school decisions.</td>
<td>Caregivers and students are seen as important resources for problem solving and learning; parents have a central role in problem solving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expected Outcomes:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Expected Outcome:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis or problem is resolved.</td>
<td>Increased family involvement in the student’s school experience; improved academic performance; fewer “insoluble” discipline problems.</td>
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Indian or multiethnic. Student attendance was about 95%. Approximately 25% of the student body received free/reduced meals. The original organizational structure of the school consisted of three units each having a counselor: an elementary (K-5) school unit consisting of 364 students and staffed by 12 teachers, a middle school unit (6-8) enrolling 372 students and composed of 15 teachers, and a secondary school (9-12) unit attended by 469 students employing 26 teachers.

We organized our project activities into six phases: (a) assessing initial attitudes and practices of the school staff, (b) setting goals, (c) organizing our school staff into instructional teams and scheduling joint planning time, (d) introducing a new meeting format for family-school problem solving, (e) implementing a student-led parent conference format to increase positive nonproblematic family-school contacts, and (f) collecting feedback about these changes from our students, parents, and teachers.

**Assessing Initial Staff Attitudes and Practices**
The initial attitudes and practices held by the school staff were not designed to bring families into their children’s learning process as equal partners. Interviews with teachers revealed that most of the school staff operated from a school-to-home “transmission” mindset (Swart, 1993) regarding how fami-
ily-school relationships should be structured. In this mindset school staff routinely identified the values and practices outside the school (i.e., in the home) that contributed to school success and expected parents to have a supportive and subordinate role (i.e., "to do what they were told"). Teachers believed that desirable family-school involvement consisted of teachers clearly and consistently informing parents of the nature of the instructional program and of the child's progress in that program; and of parents cooperating by means of checking homework, reading notices, coming to school when called, taking an interest in their children's education, and supporting the instructional program in a myriad of ways (e.g., prepare food for school parties, raise money, chaperone at dances, catalogue books in the library, prepare materials for teachers, or build playgrounds). Neither students nor their parents were viewed as possible resources for enhancing student learning and educational planning or for solving student problems. Such tasks were the exclusive responsibility of the school staff. Two-way communication between adults at home and at school was not commonplace nor sought out because the goal was for parents to understand and support the educator's objectives.

Consequently, there were no procedures for sharing information in a two-way dialogue between adults at home and school. Contacts with students' families were infrequent and uncoordinated. Those contacts that did occur usually followed incidents of children's inappropriate behavior or academic difficulty, or occurred informally when parents picked up their children from school, or when parents attended brief, highly ritualized encounters such as back-to-school night. Students' families were viewed by the staff either as a cause of student problems or as the source of greater demands. Consequently, although teachers often had friendly, informal contacts with some of the parents of their students, these contacts were neither regular nor systematic.

Instead, most of the systematic contact which school staff had with students' families were either large scale, formalized contacts or brief, problem-focused, parent-teacher conferences or special education placement conferences which did not include the student. Typically, the goals of these conferences were for the school staff to explain to the parent the seriousness of the school's concerns, and what the school had decided to do to solve the complaint. Generating solutions for a complaint typically occurred before, rather than during the time that staff met with a parent. Such a structure did not permit much opportunity for authentic dialogue or effective problem solving between school staff and students' families.

Furthermore, the school staff—teachers, counselors, administrators—had a history of operating independently from one another. Although there were informal contacts and friendships among staff members and episodic instances of joint planning aimed at resolving individual student problems or developing instructional activities, by and large teachers and counselors did not expect to have regular or systematic contact with one another or to share work responsibilities. As a result, there was no time or space in the school day allocated for working or meeting together.

Although the school's counselors had a reputation for being accessible to teachers, parents, and students to resolve individual student crisis situations, the counselors reported that they typically were asked to be involved in these matters both too little and too late. Often teachers' feelings of discouragement and exasperation were so high by the time counselors were called in to help that teachers were unable to elicit or to constructively use input from the counselor or the student's family. As a result, teachers were unable to demonstrate skills in joint decision making or conflict resolution in these situations. Instead they expected to "turn over" difficult cases and conversations with parents to the counselor rather than resolve the difficulty with the family themselves. Consequently, counselors felt that they were asked to give teachers help in resolving a problem "too late" in the process when teacher, student and family members were polarized and trust was low.

In summary, the teachers' conceptions of the roles that parents and students and counselors might play in children's learning were unnecessarily limited. Parents were often channeled into passive roles as audience members or supporters at family-school events. Students were often expected either to be absent from such encounters or be passive participants. Counselors were expected to perform a narrow range of roles as crisis interventionists or quasi-administrators. As a result, few opportunities existed for teachers, counselors, and families to develop skills in working together to enhance student learning, develop educational plans, or solve student problems.

Formulating Project Goals and Objectives
To accomplish the goal of fostering a mindset of partnership and collaboration among the school staff and students' families, we delineated a number of objectives concerning how current counselor-teacher-family relationships needed to change.

First, notions about how counselors and teachers might work together needed to expand. We believed that counselors could help their teaching colleagues to purposefully block the blaming that undermines many family-school problem-solving
routines and engage in joint problem solving. In addition, we knew that counselors could help their teaching colleagues devise opportunities to interact with students' families that are driven more by a desire to build positive alliances than by the need to resolve problems.

To do this successfully, however, counselors needed to model a collaborative or co-expert role in their interactions with teaching staff. (After all, school staffs needed to learn to work collaboratively with each other if they were to be successful at establishing collaborative relationships with families.) Counselors needed to show teachers how to elicit and constructively use student and parent input in solving student problems and in making educational plans. They also need guidance from teachers concerning how to design instructional and assessment strategies which can increase student engagement. In addition, time needed to be scheduled for counselors to work together with teachers on these tasks.

Second, parents and students needed to have active, influential roles in participating in no-fault family-school problem solving. Rather than have only a passive role, both parent and student needed to have active, influential roles, not as an audience but as full participants in family-school problem solving. Family school problem-solving meetings needed to be redesigned—following the example of the staff of the Family-School Collaboration Project at the Ackerman Institute (Weiss, 1996; Weiss & Edwards, 1992)—to underscore the role of parent and students as co-decision makers and illustrate the belief that everyone—parents, teachers and students—had a job to do to insure the student’s educational success. To learn how to do this, counselors would show teachers how to: (a) focus on identifying a problem, (b) determine who might be available to help solve the problem, (c) search together for solutions rather than fixate on determining who caused the problem and why, and (d) develop action plans together with all the stakeholders.

Third, build collaborative relationships with all parents whether the parents could come to school or not. To do this, the school needed to make clear to parents how their active participation in their children’s educational experience could directly enhance their children’s achievement and development. In addition, the school needed to look for ways to communicate a genuine interest in connecting with the parents of all of our students to insure these outcomes. Consequently, if some parents are not able to come to the school because of work or family demands, the school staff needed to signal their belief that these parents still care deeply about their child’s learning by providing them with the means to understand and keep up with what is happening in school (e.g., through use of summary letters describing an event they missed, regular newsletters, and homework assignments).

Finally, increase opportunities for nonproblematic family school interactions and plan all these activities to maximize student learning. Rather than simply trying to “get parents involved,” we wanted school staff to use the family-school relationship to meet specific educational goals, solve problems, and celebrate the children and their achievements. Rather than be organized only around a discussion of problems, we wanted school staff and families to maintain a dialogue about learning and about our school’s interest in each child. Consequently, school staff looked for opportunities for parents, students, and school staff to interact with one another in ways that emphasized family involvement in children’s planning, decision making, problem solving, and learning. To do this, grade-level counselor-teacher teams examined the various aspects of the school experience (curriculum, administrative and communication procedures, special programs, assessment and evaluation of student progress, etc.) and designed opportunities for families and school staff to experience each other differently. We decided to embed a collaborative focus into a variety of different school events (orientations, classroom instruction, homework routines, celebrations, presentations of new curriculum, transitions to new grade levels and programs, procedures for home-school communication, and for resolving difficulties). We believed that such collaborative interactions could transform the ways families and school staff members experienced each other.

Creating Shared Time for Joint Decision Making

In our discussion about wanting to work together to enhance student learning or resolve student problems, the necessity of having a scheduled time in which a student’s counselor, teachers, and family could meet together and make decisions became more and more a foregone conclusion. We arrived at this conclusion as a result of looking at several common practices. First, counselors reported that a great deal of their time and energy was often spent trying to schedule a time when the counselor and teachers could share information with each other or with a student’s family. Secondly, counselors often acted as the “go-between” gathering information about a student’s progress from each of a student’s multiple teachers (i.e., in the case of 6th to 12th grade students). Because an excessive amount of time was spent tracking down such information, little time was available for engaging in joint problem solving and planning with the student, their family and their teachers. Third, teachers regularly complained that when they wanted to refer a child to the counselor...
for counseling, they had to “track down the counselor” to talk about the student. Finally, trying to find a regular time to meet to develop new instructional practices was exceedingly challenging when teaching schedules were already full.

These complaints led us to believe that building a work schedule in which time was allocated for team meetings involving grade-level teachers and assigning a specific counselor with grade-level responsibility for students and team participation would increase our accessibility and effectiveness. As a result, we initiated grade-level instructional team meetings in which the counselor served as an active member. Teams met twice a week. Not only did teachers now have regular access to the counselor to discuss particular students, but the counselor also could now obtain the views of all of the teachers responsible for teaching a certain class of students or a particular student and, together, they could formulate a strategy of intervention. In addition, the teams set aside one of their weekly meeting times as a regularly scheduled time in which they would be available to jointly problem solve with individual students and their families. These joint problem-solving meetings were initiated by either the student, a parent, or a school staff member or team.

**Introducing No-Fault Problem-Solving Meetings**

Educators have a long tradition of meeting with parents, usually the mother, when children are experiencing difficulties at school. Students are usually left out of these conversations or only included as a punitive measure. We believed that if children were present, they could have an opportunity to observe their parents and teachers cooperating on their behavior and could hear the same message at the same time thus clarifying expectations for them as well as their parents and teachers. In addition, through these opportunities to interact with their parents and teachers, students could learn skills in communication, planning, problem solving, and teamwork and could develop greater confidence and poise in social situations. In keeping with our emphasis that all contact with families could be used to maximize student learning, we believed that children of all ages needed to be taught to function as active participants when there were conferences organized to address their problems. Since it was their life at school which was to be discussed, we believed that students needed to be invited to come to such meetings as “experts on themselves” who must be there to describe their own experience, thoughts, and feelings.

Thus, we developed a format for family-school problem-solving meetings which structured an active, co-expert role for students as well as for parents. What was unique about our family-school problem-solving meeting format was its task focus, blocking of blame, and involvement of all members of the family as persons who could contribute to resolving the child’s problems. Our message was that the student/child could be helped only when everyone including the student works together. The idea of including the child in an active, problem-solving role in such a meeting along with his or her parents and teachers was borrowed from the Ackerman Family Institute which initiated this meeting format several years ago in their work with the New York City public schools. During the 2000–2001 school year, we introduced this problem-solving meeting format and the strategies for blocking blame in a 45-minute, school-wide staff training session. We followed up on this general session by having the counselors model this problem-solving meeting format with their team. Using this new format with students and their families, the team members developed a concrete action plan with the family (student and parents) in which everyone (family and school) had a task to do to help the child. This action plan was written down and a copy was made for the family and the team. In the first year of implementation, the principal required all grade-level teams to use whatever meeting reporting form they wished to document their meeting plans with families and make copies for themselves and each family. In the following year a standardized reporting form was developed by counselors and teachers and printed in triplicate so that each teaching team, counselor, and family would have a copy of the action plan they developed.

Although the development and implementation of a plan usually helped a child significantly, we found that the more important outcome was the change in the relationships among the student, school staff, and family members. In interviews with parents about the effectiveness of these meetings, over half the parents spontaneously made remarks such as “I really got a chance to see that the teachers really cared about my child” or “I came away with a belief that they want her to succeed here.” We believe that it was this message—that student, teacher, counselor, and family could work together in a nonblaming context to develop solutions to student problems—that enabled parents to join with the teachers and the counselor to do what was needed in the long run to help their child.

**Creating Non-Problematic Interactions by Redesigning Parent-Teacher Conferences**

Despite our initial success in using family-school problem-solving meetings to create more collaborative family-school relations, we realized that changing relationships one family at a time was not an efficient way to effect significant change. Furthermore,
Table 2. Parents’, Students’, and Teachers’ Comments about Student-Led Parent Conferences

**Student Comments**
- I liked having my parent to myself to show them what I do in school rather than have my brothers and sisters there. (4th grader)
- I liked showing my parents what I was learning and doing so that they could see I really was working. (6th grader)
- I liked showing my work off to my parents. (4th grader)
- I liked being the one to decide what I would talk about with my parents. (8th grader)
- My parents trust me more about school now that they see what I have been doing. (8th grader)
- My parents told me my ideas were great and I should try my best to achieve my goals. (6th grader)
- My mom and dad were really excited and proud. They thought my portfolio was very well organized and that I’ve been doing good work. (4th grader)
- My parents now know what I like doing and what I’m smart in. (4th grader)
- My mom and I could talk in a controlled environment so she calmed down about school. (9th grader)
- I was able to show my parents my progress so it gave me more confidence. (9th grader)

**Parent Comments**
- I liked seeing what my child was expected to do in his classes. (6th grade parent)
- I liked seeing the pride my daughter had in her work. (4th grade parent)
- I learned about what she sees as her strengths and weaknesses. (4th grade parent)
- I was impressed by my son’s honesty about what he was weak in. (9th grade parent)
- I liked the opportunity my son got to organize and explain his work to me. (6th grade parent)
- This was great! Student-led conferences really give students a chance to show responsibility for their actions concerning their learning! (9th grade parent)
- Great idea! The conference gave me a chance to talk with my child. I sometimes don’t have the opportunity to do that. I found it very insightful. (8th grade parent)
- I loved the entire concept! It created an excellent atmosphere for my child and I to communicate about school without her getting on the defensive. This should be done more often. (8th grade parent)
- In the conference we were able to affirm our son’s strengths. It was also a good forum for goal setting and helped us focus on things we need to do to assist our son. We really liked the focus on the positive. (6th grade parent)
- I liked the idea of the conference being communally done. The kids get to see that this is important to other families. We need more activities to bring parents to the school to interact with other parents and to get to know your child’s peers. (9th grade parent)
- The conference made us look at our son’s work and face the issues. Our son is not enthused but this conference was better than the last. I hope he will want to have to show me more. He can be proud of next time. This conference approach makes him face the reality of his successes and failures in school. (8th grade parent)
- I was astonished by the way my child took charge of his conference. I have not seen that side of him before. (6th grade parent)

**Teacher Comments**
- It made for a lot less anxiety between me and the parents when the conference was spent with the students being the ones talking about their work. (8th grade teacher)
- I was impressed with how engaged students were in telling their parents about their work. (6th grade teacher)
- I was surprised by how many families attended the conference event and were interested in hearing what their child had to say. (9th grade teacher)
- Listening to my students explain their assignments and their work, gave me a good perspective on how much my own instructional goals and strategies were clear to my students. (4th grade teacher)
waiting until students had problems severe enough to warrant such a meeting was counter-productive. It was much more difficult to shift a relationship that already had problems than it was to change the way the school and families developed their relationships from the beginning. For our school’s teachers and counselors to work more effectively with students and their families, they needed opportunities to have positive, nonproblematic contacts in which the student and family could have active, co-decision-making roles. Like most schools, school staff had structured parent-teacher conferences so that the teacher was central, parents had a passive role, and students were not included. In the elementary grades, teachers were expected to meet at least twice a year to report on a child’s achievements or deficits to parents. In the middle and high school grades, conferences only were scheduled when a student was experiencing problems. As a result, parents believed that while they showed up for these meetings there was little that they could do to influence their children’s learning or achievement.

We knew that parents might welcome a more active, participatory role (especially if they were prepared for it) in which they could demonstrate their interest in their child and interact more directly with them. We decided to redesign the existing parent-teacher conference format by introducing a student-led parent conference format. We believed that by redesigning this common school routine to create an opportunity for positive, nonproblematic contact, we could enhance the sense of trust and increase the number of people involved in helping our students succeed in school. Drawing from the work of Austin (1994), we set as our goal the development of a new conference format in which students would share their school progress (academic and behavioral) and develop a plan together with their parents for how to move forward. The conferences were designed to supplant the traditional parent-teacher conference in which the teacher was central and the child was usually not in attendance. This new format demonstrated an approach to cooperative planning and problem solving in which students were taught ways of communicating with their parents in a respectful and cooperative manner.

Four different grade-level teams (Grades 3, 5, 7, and 10) decided to implement this new conference format. The original four teams decided to expand their efforts by implementing the student-led conferences twice a year (midway through each semester) and to build this activity into the normal event calendar of the school. We hope that this activity will be the first of a series of efforts to redesign school routines/events to provide more opportunities for parents, children, and school staff to see and interact with each other differently.

CONCLUSION

To make these types of counselor-teacher-family relations a reality requires that school counselors rethink their ideas about what their work priorities should be and how their relations with families and teachers should be structured. Counselors must consider whether they are willing: (a) to invest time in relationship development as well as treatment, (b) to address the(546,950),(797,991)(546,938),(836,955)

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selector and teachers with the families of school-age children.

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