

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot ASCD *Echoes of the Past*  
January 2005 Education Update

“Twice a Year, parents put themselves where their children spend most weekdays-in front of classroom teachers. Aside from the tiny chair and ill-fitting desk, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot noted, several factors can add to the discomfort of the typical parent-teacher conference. ‘Participating in this ritual, parents and teachers are often wracked with anxiety, exhibit wariness, and assume defensive postures,’ said Lawrence-Lightfoot, a sociologist and professor of education at Harvard University. Even though the conversation appears to be focused on the student, adults may find themselves ‘playing out their own childhood histories, insecurities, and fears,’ she added.” Both parents and teachers are “engaged in the important and precious work of raising, guiding, and teaching children.” “This must be a dialogue about the child, in the service of their learning and development,” Lawrence-Lightfoot advises.

“No conference should be generic. It should be shaped by the individual child, using specific examples taken from keen observations and fastidious record keeping. Depending on the approach parent-teacher conferences can be routine or revelatory, symbolic or substantive. Rituals can either offer a routine to mask feelings, or a framework and safe place for dialogue.”

“Race, class, immigrant status, and educational backgrounds create great contrasts in the relationships between parents and teachers.” Some families may feel uncomfortable approaching teachers and appear to be withdrawn and passive because “families do not have enough institutional information about the school to navigate the experience.”

“Schools need to seize every opportunity to collaborate with families in the interest of learning. Rich or poor, all parents have big dreams for their own children,” Lawrence-Lightfoot noted. “Parents expect the best for their children and see their achievement in school as directly linked to their achievement in life.”

Education Week

Published: March 22, 1995 **Taking Charge of the Parent-Teacher Conference**  
By **Steven W. Enoch**

“ As a superintendent, I faced the meeting with growing apprehension. I knew from experience it would be short in length, but oh so long on importance. What was this confrontation? A face-off with the board? Parents demanding curricular changes? A pivotal employee-negotiations session? No, it was a **parent-teacher conference** with me as the parent, encountering a teacher I did not know. My professional training told me that the encounter should be a valuable opportunity to gain insight into my son's academic, social, and emotional development. My personal experience had taught me that **parent-teacher conferences** often fall short of this expectation. Despite the best intentions of excellent teachers--and in this case, my own sincere desire for meaningful information--I knew that most **conferences** consist primarily of reviewing a completed report card, with perhaps a computer printout of test scores to refer to. While this exercise is of some value, it gives only limited insight, most of which parents could gain at home by reviewing the same documents themselves. Teachers, in my experience as a parent (my children attend school in a district other than the one I work in), seem hesitant to take the strong, professional stance in a face-to-face meeting that I wish they would.”

“Teachers are, after all, experts in observing student development. They have a wonderful ability to find and share positive attributes about every child. They also know when there is good reason to be concerned and what parents need to do to help their children academically. Yet many seem timid about **parent-teacher conferences**. A common problem, I suspect, is that those with weak administrative support quickly learn never to confront parents about incomplete or missing home partnerships. Administrators and school districts too often have been negligent in empowering teachers to be the confident experts we desperately need in public education.”

The **parent-teacher conference** is a wonderful opportunity for both the parent and the teacher to gain important information about the child and to build a stronger bond between school and home. With these suggested approaches as a framework for discussion, and with teachers communicating from a position of professional authority and respect, **parent-teacher conferences** can become an investment of time that pays dividends for years to come.