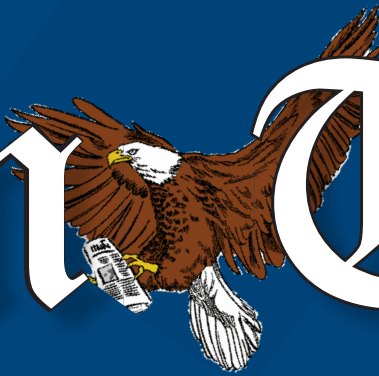


Talon Times



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Parent-teacher conferences:

Are they practical?

By Jessica Sherwin
News Editor

Parent-teacher conferences. Three little words that can create anxiety for many students. However, that apprehension may not be necessary in years to come. Although no decisions have been made about the future of parent-teacher conferences, some are beginning to investigate the practicality of these meetings—especially in this time when several alternative forms of communication are available.

This begs the question: Are conferences necessary? Principal Stephen Plank acknowledges both sides of the issue. "There is a great benefit associated with meeting parents, being able to just talk. And I think the real beneficiary is the student. If the teacher and parent can get on the same page, the student can get the same message at school and at home," Plank said.

Parent-teacher conferences can be "wildly eye-opening conversations" for parents, Plank said. It is common for parents to perceive their children as outspoken at home and hear from their teachers that, when in school, their child is very introverted, or vice versa.

"I enjoyed meeting the teachers face to face and it helped me get a better understanding of what my daughter does at school," said parent Stacy Soderlund. However, the allotted time put aside for conferences does not allow for every parent to come.

"The way that we schedule doesn't even afford every parent to come to conferences," Plank said.

Although the school publicizes conferences, the majority of students fail to tell their parents of conference opportunities.

In an unofficial poll of 57 students, 83 percent of students said they do not tell their parents when conferences are coming up.

Parent-teacher conferences serve as an important means of interaction, but with email, the Parental Access Support System (PASS), and other successful methods of communication, conferences perhaps are becoming less necessary. Additionally, the work that goes into planning and scheduling conferences might exceed the pay-off.

Lesia Semitka is one of four support staff members who schedules parents to meet with their choice teachers for ten-minute sessions.

Each teacher has time to meet with approximately 30 parents.

"Sometimes having these assigned sessions limits the people that need to get in," Semitka said.

And generally, many of the parents who fill those slots are not the parents the teachers need to see because their students are performing well.

"There is a correlation between students who struggle in school and how often we talk with the parents. We tend not to see those parents at conferences," Plank said.

This is one reason why some school leaders are in favor of removing conferences from the calendar altogether—or at least restructuring who conferences are designed for.

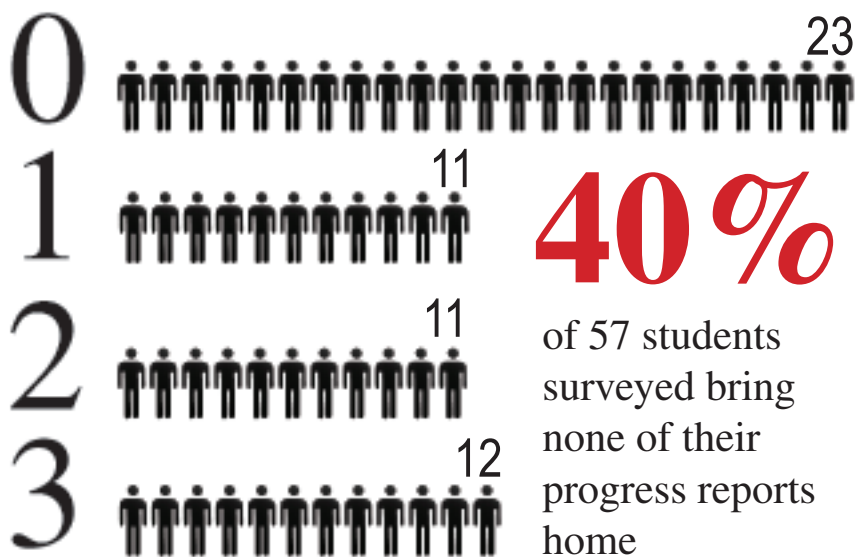
"We're not attracting the audience that potentially has the most to benefit. Technology has changed the way that we communicate. Text alerts, Moodle pages, stuff you couldn't do before makes us ask, 'Is this method of communication obsolete?' and whether or not having these conferences is effective. Those are the two real key talking points," Plank said.

Nonetheless, face to face contact is an important factor of communication. It is "important to put the face and name together, especially for freshmen," said Kitty Wiegel, another

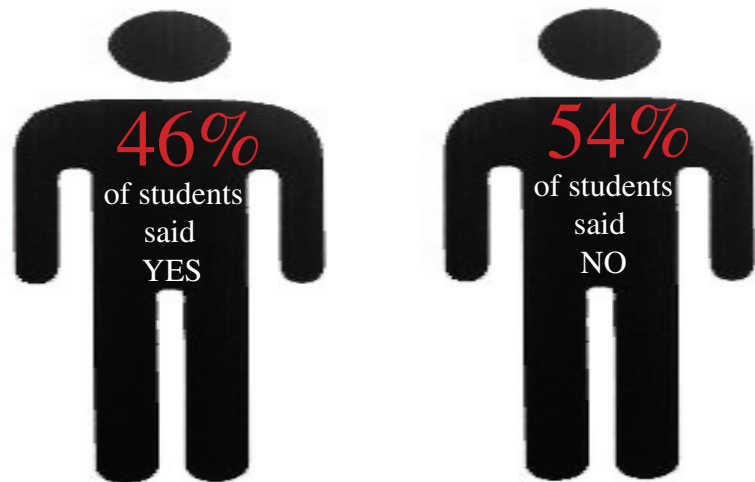
Fifty-seven students were asked the following questions about parent-teacher conferences.

Infographic by Jessica Sherwin

Out of the three progress reports given out per semester, how many do you bring home to your parents on time?



Do your parents regularly check PASS?



Do you inform your parents of conference opportunities?



support staff member involved in scheduling conferences.

"I think it is good public relations to show that we are interested in the students," she said.

Other schools take different approaches to parent-teacher conferences, such as sessions in an arena-type setting. This is when parents just pop in to a classroom as teachers are available rather than scheduling an appointment. This saves time and eliminates the need for arduous scheduling.

Despite the talk, conferences will remain a part of the school year for years to come. The decision to not have conferences would have to be balanced against the benefit and Lakes is not quite ready to move in a direction to have that conversation yet, Plank said.

"There are limitations on our end and for families there are limitations," Plank said. "It might not be practical."

However, students' dreams of the dreaded conferences being eliminated should not be crushed just yet. "Anything is always a possibility," Plank said with a smile.