



Grade 3-4

April 18, 2008

Dear 3rd and 4th Grade Parents,

It was great to see everyone last week for conferences. These conferences are so good because we all get to talk *to* rather than *about* the student. He or she gets to hear it all: the well deserved compliments, the suggestions for things to work on, and the concerns we might have. So every year we do a lot of preparation. We talk about why they ought to be there for a conversation about their learning. They have to do some self assessment and goal setting. They work on their portfolios and think about the progress they have made since the beginning of the year. This year, I realized there was one piece missing... all this talk about conferences means nothing to a little third grader who has never sat in a conference! In teaching you quickly learn to model everything, and yet, here I was expecting students to participate in something they have never even seen.

We quickly enlisted Ms. Geller as our student, the fourth graders played parents, and I pretended to be the teacher, (I'm pretty good at that). First Ms. Geller modeled what not to do in your conference. She did everything but hide under the table, and the kids had fun pointing out all the things *they* wouldn't do. Next she modeled a well prepared, confident student, who launched her own conference, accepted praise and advice, talked *and* listened, and obviously enjoyed the experience. I could practically feel the relief in the room, all those minds realizing '*Oh, so that's what happens, that's what it's like, I can do that!*'

On Thursday it was both exciting and touching to see students put all their preparation into practice. They were so confident and engaged; clearly comfortable being the focus of a conversation they involved them, rather than moving around and over them. I even saw some students borrow the odd line from Ms. Geller.

This week they are sitting eight standardized tests. No matter what we tell them, tests are scary. Children worry that how they perform on these tests will determine important things like what we think of them, or how smart they are. I have tried to emphasize that the tests are mainly important as practice for taking this type of test; they are learning test taking strategies that they will keep practicing in future grades. I have also explained that the work in their portfolio, the comments in their reports, their own academic goals, and the ongoing hard work they do every day are all far more important in showing how well they are doing in school. To me, the maturity, pride, and openness these students all showed in their conferences are the best indicators of their current and continuing progress!

Sincerely,
Liza Butler

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