

Student Conferences

A group of high school students have established The Student Conferences, which provides a stage for students in Howard County to interact with the community. We have developed a series of innovative discussions for fellow teens featuring guest speakers who have contributed to society in admirable ways. Because these conferences feature a variety of topics and active workshops selected and designed by students themselves, they allow other students to expand their horizons in topics that truly interest teens and in ways that teens themselves deem effective.

Best Practice 1: What recognized community need was met by your project? Teens need the opportunity to meet and converse actively in person with influential members of society to learn about societal bonds and concerns, to expand their horizons by being exposed to unique views, and to explore crucial areas such as politics, humanities, social sciences, and much more. Prior to The Student Conferences, there hasn't been any organization in Howard County directly ran by and specifically for teens to serve this purpose. While a few teens would attend a mostly adult community event, many would, when motivated by their peers (Student Conferences volunteers), join the active workshops designed and run from the student perspective. By taking interest and gaining insights into the community through active discussions today, teens can identify issues and better contribute to society in the future.

A survey conducted among members of the Teen Community Forum indicated that 85.7% of the teens surveyed were interested in joining seminars with knowledgeable professionals to actively discuss various topics. The School PTAs and the Horizon Foundation (a local philanthropic organization) have advocated more productive activities for teens to steer them away from drugs and alcohol. In addition, in today's society teenagers are often viewed as delinquent, irresponsible, and passive; the recent increase in incidences of teen violence and deaths in the county seem to have enhanced that view. The Student Conferences hopes to use methods developed by teens to give teens an opportunity to gain interest in issues in society and be actively involved. We, as students ourselves, strongly believe that developing in students a passion about the individual and society will not only keep the violence and hatred out of schools, but also create greater impetus for teen service and leadership.

All our conferences are free of charge to students and parents across the county. At each conference, there have been about forty students and families participating. Students gain a stronger sense of self and society - of what the individual is passionate about, and how the individual can contribute to the society in that passion. In a guest speaker a student might gain a new sense of heroism, and in a featured topic a student might develop eager interest or strong convictions. These discussions have also been opportunities for parents to get involved in the interests of their teens, be informed of current teen issues, and understand the student perspective. Past student participants in the conferences have remarked: "These conferences are something everyone should hear;" "Finally, I have a chance to speak my mind!"

Best Practice 2: How was the project connected to the school curriculum and curricular objectives? The conferences have reinforced academic learning in various areas through active workshops and lectures featuring professional musicians, renowned journalists (such as Washington Post columnist Colman McCarthy), and published poets. Topics covered in past conferences included: "The Writer's Session," which helped students expand and improve on their own essay and poetry writings. "Solution to Conflicts" (discussion on national events lead by Washington Post columnist) which gave students the opportunity to think through issues and create a peaceful solution to the many problems facing our society. "Music Madness" taught students various ways of looking at situations in relationship to songs. It also, gave everyone a chance to hone their debating skills on the impact of lyrics, censorship and image in popular music today. The next conference we are planning will feature the Media Culture: editors of local newspapers will discuss the art of journalism, and several students will show music videos they've created as part of the curriculum in the Howard County Public School System.

Best Practice 3: How did participants reflect on their experiences throughout the project? First of all, the Student Conferences has established these basic objectives: Expose students to unique views and topics - each Student Conference session will approach a general issue at a different angle; Reach out to diverse students across the county - records of participants at each discussion (which the participants fill out at registration) will measure if

students from all over the county have participated in the Student Conferences; Let students meet notables who have contributed to society in admirable ways - Student Conference invite speakers to discuss an area in which they have made a contribution; Give students a memorable and enjoyable experience that they'll cherish - at the end of each conference, student participants filled out anonymous feedback forms, giving ratings on specific categories such as speakers, workshops, and topic. The Student Conferences group meets after each conference to reflect on whether these objectives have been met, and focus on future improvements after examining the feedback forms. For example, one of the suggestions with our first conference was that the lecture was too long. So for the conferences afterwards, we focused on developing more and better workshops. Currently, we are trying to improve our advertising by sending out invitations to related clubs at each school and creating posters to be posted at all high schools.

Best Practice 4: How did students take leadership roles and take responsibility for the success of the project?

The Student Conferences was founded and is run by high school students from across the county with the aid of two adult sponsors. Each member of the Student Conferences has specific job delegations. For example, the president delegates tasks, contacts potential speakers, and arranges locations; the publicist writes articles for local newspapers and creates fliers; and the secretary keeps track of student registrations and takes notes at each meeting. In addition, all members of the Student Conferences have the responsibility of advertising and encouraging registrations for the conferences at their respective schools, which requires much persuasive and leadership ability. We all work in detail on each conference's program so as to make each conference worthwhile for all participants. We also run each conference. During the conferences, all student participants take an active role in the discussions with guest speakers. Participants also lead a side in debates, share their creative writings, and advocate their ideas for school improvements in their groups.

Best Practice 5: What community partners were worked with on this project? The Student Conferences has worked with: Teen Community Forum, High School Views (the only countywide newspaper for teens), Maryland's Governor's Office on Service and Volunteerism, Howard County Community Building, Peer Mediation Group, Howard County Poetry and Literature Society, and Baltimore Writer's Alliance.

Best Practice 6: How did you prepare and plan ahead for the project? Much preparation is needed to hold a successful conference. For each conference, the Student Conferences established a timeline for arranging guest speakers, setting a place and date, posting fliers, etc., in order to best organize ourselves. We communicated thoroughly with each guest speaker over the telephone, and in person when possible, and asked them to submit outlines of what they would present. To create engaging and meaningful workshops, we sought the input of students who were "specialists" in our planned topic (such as student poets for The Writer's Session, student musicians for Music Madness.) We also worked with community organizations and professionals to ensure that each conference would cover a topic in depth and breadth. Then, based on speaker outlines, student input, and suggestions of professionals, we create detailed schedules of events with time allocations for each event as well as conference packets for all participants.

Best Practice 7: What knowledge and skills did students develop through this project? Throughout the organization and the execution of the Student Conferences, both the members planning the conferences and participants have gained invaluable experiences and knowledge. We members have further developed our organization, leadership, and communication skills. In addition, there have been various incidences that required tactful control. For example, one of our speakers was involved in a major accident the week before the conference, so we had to readjust our schedules and find another guest speaker. The conference attendees have enriched their knowledge and expanded their horizons in writing, poetry, music, national and current events, etc. Furthermore, they have gained interest and insight in society, and have honed their communication and leadership skills through active discussions and workshops.

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