Conferencing the SMART Way

As schools across the nation strive to eliminate student achievement gaps, it has become more crucial than ever for parents to be involved, especially parents of children achieving below grade level. In Maryland’s Howard County Public Schools, a parent-teacher conferencing program called SMART, focused on Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Results-oriented, and Targeted goals, was created to accelerate the achievement of academically at-risk students by engaging parents in home interventions designed to address the specific needs of individual students.

The need for SMART conferencing was established after conversations with parents and survey data indicated that parents who wanted to help their children often lacked appropriate direction. For example, typically recommended home activities, such as reading 20 minutes a night with their children or helping them memorize math facts, often were not closely aligned to the particular skills and concepts needed by a child to move up to grade level.

A New Involvement Strategy

SMART conferences are different from typical parent-teacher conferences in many ways. They seek to establish an ongoing relationship with parents in which data is shared and assessed, focus areas are established, and specific recommendations are made for student improvement in those areas. Recommendations are broken down into manageable tasks that can be worked on at home for 15 to 20 minutes each night, and parents are provided with the necessary materials, time requirements, and a date when the targeted skill will be assessed.

In a SMART conference, the emphasis is on collaboration and on alignment of the parents’ wishes, hopes, and dreams for their children with the school’s goals. For example, if a parent dreams of sending a child to college, the teacher discusses how the more immediate short-term goal of achieving grade level is relevant to that long-term goal.

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Selling a System

Because conferencing techniques are critical to SMART success, participating teachers are trained to use effective selling techniques to form partnerships with parents and increase follow-through on recommended home interventions. Teachers use information about an individual student’s interests and academic needs to establish goals that are then shared with parents at an initial conference. At this time, the teacher seeks a commitment from the parents to collaborate on a specific intervention. For example, instead of saying to the parent, “Johnny needs to learn his multiplication facts, so please make sure he studies them at home,” the teacher might say, “As you can see from these assessments, Johnny is making good progress learning his multiplication tables. However, he still is having some difficulty with some of his sevens, eights, and nines. There are approximately 10 to 12 facts in the 7, 8, and 9 times tables that he is consistently missing. We have set a goal for Johnny to master all of his multiplication facts by the end of the third marking period.”

Selling parents on specific, manageable recommendations, which are targeted toward their children and have short-term assessment windows, are based on a win-win philosophy focused on an ongoing relationship with parents to achieve goals (Kendall 1995). As an example of how the SMART approach motivates parents, one teacher commented that she had been in the habit of assessing students on the third Friday of each month and informing parents if their children had mastered their set goals. But on a Friday when the teacher was absent from school and did not provide feedback, she received three voice-mail messages from anxious parents inquiring if their children had achieved their goals.

Meeting the Challenges

To fully implement the strategies of SMART conferencing, funding is needed for teacher training and time must be provided for teachers to have extended conferences and follow-up contact with parents on the progress of each goal. In fact, the short-term follow-up is key to keeping parents and students motivated.

Teachers trained in SMART conferencing techniques have found that focusing parents’ efforts on their children’s specific needs increases parent follow-through at home. In the first year of implementation, 68 percent of the home learning goals were achieved and 40 percent of the participating students reached grade-level status. As teachers become more comfortable with the conferencing format and more proficient at setting SMART goals, and parents become more involved, it is anticipated that the number of students mastering short-term goals will continue to increase.

Reference


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