

## STUDENTS TAKE OVER

Students in total control. No, there hasn't been a coup (yet), but we did just finish our first round of student-led parent conferences for this spring. These conferences, now in their third year at Bet Shraga, give students an opportunity to talk with significant adults about their educational progress. And, the conferences are expanding. The first year middle school students presented in ELA. The next year, they were able to choose from a number of classes they take. This year, they chose two classes to talk about. Fourth and fifth graders present in multiple subjects to their parents and teachers.

In middle school, each student chooses two subjects (one secular studies and one Judaic studies) about which they want to present to their parents and advisor. The meetings are facilitated by the student, who prepares before conferences are held. During the meetings, the students share their successes in the course, but also are quite adept at identifying areas that need improvement. Student-led conferences engage the parent and the student more, and the teacher less, in analyzing and reporting the progress a child is making.

The preparation and the conferences force students to reflect about their learning. And, they are quite good at it. It should be noted that the students are frequently harder on themselves and more honest about their work than parents or teachers would be or can be. Students can share work they have done, talk about projects they have enjoyed or struggled with, offer explanations for their successes (or near successes), and talk about their future.

What does the research say about student-led conferences? Parent participation in conferences increases 40% - 60% when student-led conferences are implemented. The face-to-face-to-face meetings take the "he said, she said" out of traditional parent-teacher conferences. Students build self-confidence and self-esteem. Lines of communication are opened between the student and parent. Kids say there is less yelling when they get home because they were present when the information was shared...by them!

What do teachers learn from student-led conferences? On Thursday, I proudly sat with each of my middle school advisees and listened as they did all or most of the talking. I heard my students comfortably tell their parents about their learning and, in some cases, teach their parents about things that excited the kids when they learned it. I heard students talk about learning a long Mishna, analyzing one of the Ten Commandments as part of a group performance, enjoying project choices in history, helping others in math class, tackling the higher-level thinking of math word problems, creating their own myths in English, and discovering the difference between speaking Hebrew and writing it. I got a real sense of what our middle school students do every day, and the sense that we need to expand our student-led conferences to include all subjects and more students. Nobody understands the students' strengths and challenges more than the students themselves. So, let them take over. There is still plenty of work for the adults to do.