

Supporting Every Student:

Academic Conferencing in High School

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To learn more about Springpoint,
please visit our website:
www.springpointschools.org

About Springpoint

Springpoint is a national nonprofit that partners with districts, charters, and networks, supporting them to reimagine high schools and design student learning experiences that prepare all young people for college and career success. We do this by working alongside partners to develop an understanding of their students' needs and assets, establish a foundation of positive youth development, and create a strong instructional core that helps students build key competencies and skills. Our supports range from strategic advising and capacity building for districts and networks, to direct school support via whole-group adult learning experiences, leadership coaching, observation visits, and continuous improvement processes.

This publication is part of Springpoint's field-building efforts, which aim to help educators across the country as they develop and implement student-centered school models. We are committed to sharing learnings and practices that we have developed, co-created with partners, or sourced from the field.

We hope this resource is useful to practitioners, school leaders, and communities working to reimagine the experience of school and ensure that all students are supported to succeed.

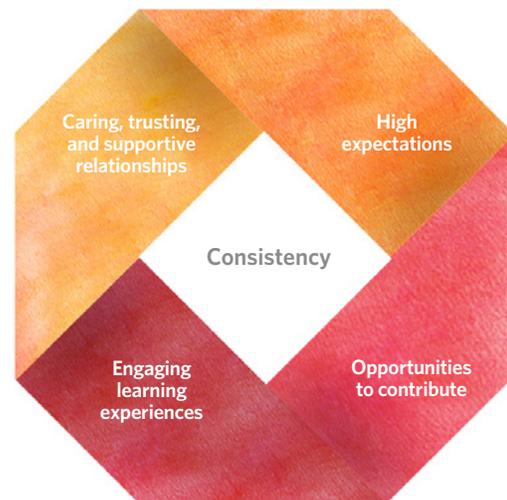


Introduction: Grounding Practice in Youth Development

At Springpoint, positive youth development (PYD)¹ is the foundation of all our school support partnerships. This means that we place young people’s developmental needs at the center of our work in schools.

Our work is grounded in the belief that young people succeed and thrive academically when educational experiences sync with their primary developmental aims of cultivating a sense of identity and belonging and developing mastery in areas deeply connected to their own long and short-term goals. That holds true whether schools are instituting strong instructional practices, developing robust advisory systems, leveraging data use to drive continuous improvement, or building out support mechanisms that codify teacher roles and strengthen teaching practices. This is the core philosophical underpinning of positive youth development. PYD is an explicitly anti-racist approach as it unambiguously asserts and recognizes the boundless potential of every student. Embedded within PYD is the concept that adults need to be able to see and cultivate this potential in every student with an understanding that this potential is sometimes less seen or understood in marginalized populations, especially when teachers and administrators do not share the same backgrounds as the students they serve. The primary role of educators in a school community is to find, nurture, and cultivate each student’s potential.

Positive youth development manifests in how students are greeted when they enter the building; in how the school schedule is built; and in how teachers set



expectations, deliver content, and support learning. It ensures that rigor and high expectations are the norm for every student because individualized supports are built into the school’s design and programming. Some districts, schools, and support organizations have attempted to achieve this goal through a class, a curriculum focused on social and emotional development (SEL), or an advisory program that aims to broadly support student well-being. In our work with school and district partners, we have found that the most effective and pragmatic approach to this is not via a stand-alone course, which can pose scheduling and

¹ For more information on Springpoint’s approach to Positive Youth Development—including practical tools and look fors—please see our publication [here](#).

budgetary challenges and does not always integrate authentic opportunities for students to practice the concepts they are learning. Rather, we have seen schools most successfully employ the tenets of PYD when they are used as the foundation to build targeted systems, structures, and strategies. This helps make it possible for all young people to succeed and thrive academically because their authentic interests, sense of purpose, and deep need for connection are effectively leveraged throughout their school experience. One such system schools can employ is a primary person model. A primary person model is a system wherein every student in a school has a consistent, supportive relationship with a trusted adult who is invested in their success.

A key practice that can effectively anchor a primary person system and create pathways to educational success for all students is academic conferencing. Academic conferencing is a structured approach to student support that focuses on guiding students to set and achieve academic goals and become independent learners. The consistent application of this practice is reflective of an intentional and embedded positive youth development approach and deeply connected to racial equity. When schools consistently recognize and develop student strengths and support meaningful goal attainment, they are more likely to ignite student interest, motivate independent learners, and empower all young people to experience academic success.

CASE STUDY

Troy,* an 18-year-old with only enough credits to be considered a 10th grader, was not attending school regularly. He left his traditional high school to attend a smaller, alternative school. Troy remained disengaged at the new school as well, until the school reworked their curriculum and built in a new set of touchpoints. Conferencing with his teacher and other staff began, a few times a week at first, focused on building rapport through his interest in poetry and using that interest to learn more about his life. Meetings became consistent, as both Troy and his teacher committed to the relationship. Over time, things began to change. In Fall 2020, the school began a slam poetry project that included performances over Zoom with slam poets. On a Zoom call with a slam poet, the teacher noticed that Troy stayed on the call well past the time he typically dropped off. As the weeks progressed, Troy became the most active student in the class, even sharing his writing when a newspaper reporter visited. The newspaper later published Troy's poem, making him a published writer. The change in Troy was remarkable, and the next semester, in an entirely different class, he was the student who showed up and participated the most.

As the reverberations of the COVID-19 school closures continue to echo throughout the K-12 landscape, students need personalized supports and caring relationships with adults now more than ever to help them succeed academically and thrive in their post-secondary pursuits. A systematized approach to ensuring that every student has this type of connection to school can support higher levels of student engagement, attendance, and learning. [In speaking with high school educators nationally throughout 2020](#), we found that schools with high levels of

student achievement and sense of belonging had structured systems in place for communicating, goal setting, and conferencing with students.

This publication aims to support educators in implementing the practice of academic conferencing. It will describe in detail the role of a strong academic conferencing practice, contextualize the practice in a primary person model, explain its foundations in positive youth development and student equity, and provide tools that can support strong execution.

*Student's name has been changed.



Establishing a Foundation: The Primary Person Model

Caring, trusting, supporting relationships are an essential aspect of implementing effective academic conferencing.

A primary person model (PPM) is a codified approach to ensuring that every student in a school has support from a caring adult, and that this adult is invested in their growth and well-being. It is based on the recognition that students are more likely to thrive in school when they have at least one supportive adult who knows them well and believes in them.^{1,2} It is a common experience among students and educators alike to reflect on a school relationship that was transformative for them—a special connection between a teacher and student in which a teacher’s focused concern brought a student out of their shell or enabled them to see themselves as a successful learner. A PPM makes this experience universal for all students. With a well-executed PPM, opportunities for transformative relationships are not left to chance. Rather, they are intentionally built through structures and processes that provide all students with a clearly defined, consistent relationship.

The primary person is directly and intentionally connected to supporting academic and developmental success, and has two core functions: holding structured academic conferences with students; and serving as a



liaison to other sources of student support including content teachers, student support team members, families, and external resources. The PPM is a vehicle for building relational capital, structuring academic expectations to promote academic self-efficacy, and helping students build, step by step, an identity as a successful student in charge of their own learning.

1 Murphey, D., Bandy, T., Schmitz H., and Moore, K.A. (2013). “Caring Adults: Important for Positive Child Well-Being. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.” <https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/2013-54CaringAdults.pdf>

2 Bowers, EP., Geldhof, G.J., Callina, K.S., Napolitano, C.M., Minor, K., Lerner, J.V. (2012). “Relationships With Important Nonparental Adults and Positive Youth Development: An Examination of Youth Self-Regulatory Strengths as Mediators.” *Research in Human Development*, 9:4, 298-316, DOI: 10.1080/15427609.2012.729911.

Zaretta Hammond's work, especially *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, is useful in understanding what is critical in the effective execution of a primary person model. Hammond works from an equity framework that prioritizes students becoming independent learners — those with the “ability to direct [their] attention toward [their] own learning” (p. 61).³ For Hammond, ensuring that students ultimately take responsibility for their own learning is the most crucial tool schools have for promoting equity in educational outcomes for all students. Hammond suggests that teaching and learning must focus on instructional strategies that enable students to “learn how to learn” so that they can develop and utilize the cognitive strategies required for challenging work without dependence on teacher support. She proposes that a supportive relationship between student and educator — one that is grounded in a carefully calibrated combination of trust, challenge, and scaffolding — has the potential to be transformative for student learning. Hammond refers to this working collaboration between educator and student as the “learning partnership.” She champions learning partnerships as essential to building student agency and launching students on the pathway to taking ownership of and truly being invested in their own learning.

Hammond draws on the concept of a “warm demander” to refer to the stance required for success by educators in the learning partnership. In this approach, the primary person intentionally builds rapport and trust, which earns them “permission” to set demands regarding engagement and effort. An essential part of this approach is that the primary person scaffolds the student's efforts through supportive strategies that create a progression of attainable goals and encourage persistence and resilience. This creates an atmosphere where the student feels supported to take chances, encouraged to try again when they miss the mark, and celebrated when they meet their goals.

A warm demander is someone who:

- ⊗ explicitly focuses on building rapport and trust and expresses warmth in non-verbal ways
- ⊗ shows personal regard for students by inquiring about important people and events in their lives
- ⊗ earns the right to demand engagement and effort
- ⊗ is very competent with technical side of instruction
- ⊗ holds high standards while also offering emotional support and scaffolding
- ⊗ encourages productive struggle
- ⊗ is viewed by students as caring because of mixture of personal regard and high expectations

The practice of the **academic conference** is a key way to build learning partnerships.

*Hammond, pg 99

Hammond uses a [helpful graphic](#) that illustrates the difference between a warm demander as compared to other educator stances.

³ Hammond, Z.L. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press



Implementing Academic Conferencing

Academic conferencing is a structured approach to working with all students to provide support toward academic success.

Led by a primary person, academic conferences are where the key elements of positive youth development intersect: ongoing efforts to build caring, authentic relationships with students interwoven with a clear and direct focus on high academic expectations, goal setting, and reflection. Using a data-based approach, a primary person supports students to set achievable goals, address real-time needs, and join with students to reflect upon how their own efforts are contributing to their academic growth. Key to conferencing success is a clear assessment of the student's strengths and challenges and a strong personal investment in and understanding of the student as an individual. Success in academic conferencing looks like students increasingly taking responsibility for their own learning, leveraging the relationship with the primary person to get support and resources when needed, and setting increasingly challenging academic goals for themselves as educational growth leads to increased confidence and aspirations.



Key to conferencing success is a clear assessment of the student's strengths and challenges and a strong personal investment in and understanding of the student as an individual.

Getting Started

Effective academic conferencing starts with the primary person demonstrating authentic interest in getting to know the student. The primary person's role is to understand the student as both a person and a learner, and to model the underlying conferencing framework of trust building, goal setting, and reflection. In getting started with students in an academic conference, the primary person aims to discover how the student views themselves as a learner, and understand their aspirations, interests and passions, as well as the context of their life outside of school.

As part of these initial conversations, the primary person introduces themselves and explains their role as working with the student to help them ultimately become an independent learner. The primary person explains that it's their job to understand the student, provide support and encouragement, and offer a guided approach to setting goals, taking action, and reflecting on results. Reviewing the *Academic Conferencing Protocol* (Appendix A) with the student is a good way to introduce the basic concepts of the conference. For some young people, the primary person may determine that sharing the protocol as a concrete tool may not be helpful at the outset of conferencing, or they may find themselves adapting the tool as needed. This type of individualized judgement and adaptation is an important component of successful conferencing. The academic conferencing approach that Springpoint promotes consists of the following steps (described in more detail below):

- ⊗ Pre-work
- ⊗ Connect and Assess
- ⊗ Goal Review
- ⊗ Data Dive
- ⊗ Goal Setting
- ⊗ Codify and Activate

Trust and relationship building are at the center of a successful partnership between the primary person and the student.

The primary person's task at the outset of academic conferencing is to invite the student to actively participate in the process and introduce them to the steps and key strategies. Trust and relationship building are at the center of a successful partnership between the primary person and the student. Even if the primary person already knows the student well, it is important to set the tone and norms for how this particular relationship will work this school year. After introducing students to the purpose of academic conferencing, focusing on 'getting-to-know-you activities' during the first one to two meetings can set a foundation for trust and respect. Some successful examples may include, [life-mapping](#), a [feelings wheel](#) discussion, [student interview questions](#), or [discussion prompts](#).

The primary person's responsibility is to teach the student what academic conferencing is and to build students' capacity to do the following: complete pre-work to prepare for the conference; examine data about their academic performance and progress with the primary person; set and review goals based on the data; and, over time, take on more responsibility for leading the conference. The primary person also supports the student in transferring what they are learning from one context to another and connects the specific, bite-size goals to the student's graduation pathway, broader passions, and career interests.

Differentiation: Tailoring Academic Conferencing to Student Need

Effective academic conferencing relies on a deep and strategic understanding of each student. The primary person seeks to understand a student’s current life situation, engagement with school, and academic performance so they can differentiate their approach to students and arrange their caseload to ensure that the correct approach to each student is based on their individual needs and preferences. Initial conferencing sessions typically focus on the primary person understanding two specific aspects of a student’s educational experience:



1) Engagement.....

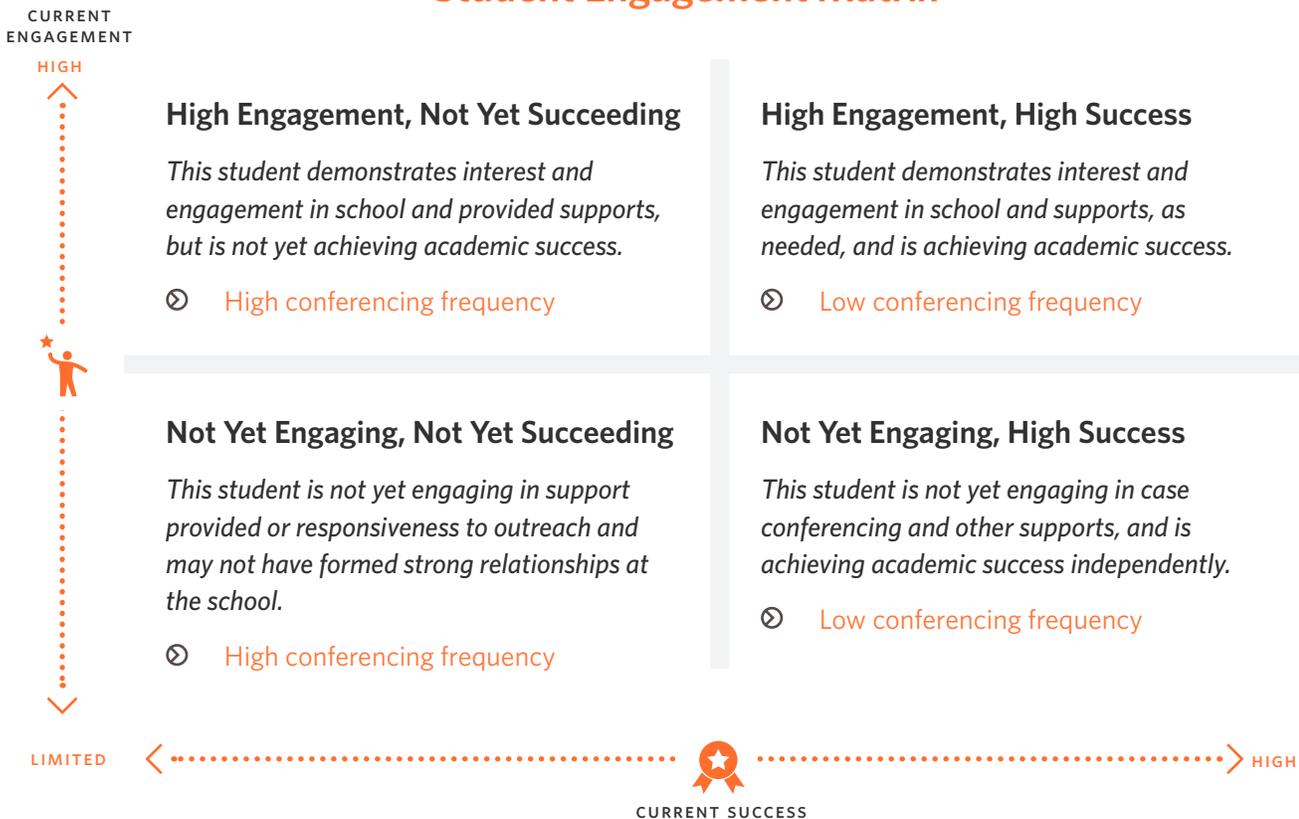
A student’s engagement with school can be understood in several ways. Attendance is key, but it is not a sufficient measure of a student’s academic investment. Naturally, if a student is not attending school, the primary person will need to gather information from various sources to understand and successfully address barriers to attendance. But amongst students who do attend regularly, other aspects of their connection to school will be illuminating. Students’ own reflections as well as data on their level of effort, involvement with teachers, and participation in class and other school activities are all important ways to understand how strongly a student is investing themselves in the school community and in their own success.

2) Academic Success.....

The primary person takes a collaborative, data-based approach to understanding a student’s level of academic success. Grades and test scores, pace of assignment completion, and alignment with past or anticipated levels of performance can all be reviewed and discussed with the student. This helps demonstrate how the student’s performance lines up with their own expectations and post-secondary goals, as well as the expectations of other academic stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and counselors.

Springpoint recommends utilizing a **Student Engagement Matrix** to differentiate students based on the two axes of engagement and academic success to determine the ideal dosage of conferencing and the proportion of overall conferencing time that the primary person should schedule for each type of student:

Student Engagement Matrix



It's valuable for the primary person to regularly pause and reflect on where each student falls within the matrix and update their thinking as necessary. A primary person may need to revise the percentage of time devoted to the formal elements of the academic conference versus relationship building to promote a level of engagement aligned with positive student outcomes.

The matrix is a good starting point for planning a primary person's approach to their work with any particular student. A student in the upper left quadrant (high engagement/low success) will need an approach that focuses on building tactical skills and right-sizing goals to build momentum. A student

in the lower left quadrant (low engagement/low success) will require an approach that focuses almost entirely on relationship building that occurs outside of formal conference time, as described in the Student Engagement Matrix Action Steps chart below. Effective academic conferencing calls upon the advisor to deploy a range of strategies and supports in varying doses and frequencies based upon the different needs, learning styles, and circumstances of students across their caseload. The matrix below suggests a variety of action steps that align with each of the different engagement/success profiles and provides some possible elements in the individualized roadmap each primary person will devise to help students move toward greater success.

Student Engagement Matrix Action Steps

CURRENT
ENGAGEMENT

HIGH

High Engagement, Not Yet Succeeding

Guide this student to see and feel success in an area of personal interest and then to understand how to transfer that success to other areas through targeted quick wins.

- ⊗ Begin with many quick check-ins, e.g., daily 3 minute “huddles”.
- ⊗ Create bite-sized action steps.
- ⊗ Dig in deep to one subject to generate momentum; ideally this subject is tied to an area of personal interest to the student.
- ⊗ Find and fuel quick wins within that one subject.
- ⊗ After successes, one longer conference a week might be better suited to this student. Demonstrate how successes in focus subject areas can translate to other subjects.
- ⊗ Ensure students reflect upon and transfer the tactical skills they are mastering (e.g., time management, asking for help, making strategic choices, etc.).
- ⊗ Elicit interest in enrichment opportunities and leverage school resources (like an external partnerships coordinator) to coordinate these opportunities.

High Engagement, High Success

Guide this student to stretch to achieve academic excellence and to pursue enrichment activities and additional challenges.

- ⊗ Identify areas of deep academic interest and set goals to stretch the student to academic excellence (e.g., writing an outstanding paper, enrolling in a college course, etc.).
- ⊗ In general, the support for this student should focus on finding and expanding areas of interest and passion, defining stretch opportunities, and then connecting students with the people/resources to help them pursue those interests.
- ⊗ Elicit interest in enrichment opportunities and leverage school resources (like an external partnerships coordinator) to coordinate these opportunities.

Not Yet Engaging, Not Yet Succeeding

Encourage this student to connect to school and to be supported and lifted up consistently and persistently.

- ⊗ Try every form of communication to reach the student and their outside-of-school supporters.
- ⊗ Build rapport, trust, and connection through regular contact and conversations; connect them with other adults/peers.
- ⊗ Elicit interests that might link to enrichment opportunities and leverage school resources (like an external partnerships coordinator) to coordinate these opportunities.
- ⊗ Seek to understand if there are underlying causes that the school may be able to support and/or ameliorate, and communicate with the school team to enact those supports.
- ⊗ Work with the school team to modify the instructional program to focus on one unit/course of high interest so the student starts to feel self-efficacy, to believe they can “do” school.
- ⊗ Once connections regularly happen, begin to create momentum with achievable small goals and celebrate all successes.

Not Yet Engaging, High Success

Support this student to kindle interest and passion through exposure to new ideas, experiences, and people.

- ⊗ Build rapport and connection through regular conversations in a communication method the student engages in (e.g., messaging, emailing, brief chats in the hallway).
- ⊗ Work to find out what makes them tick; this may be best achieved through communication and connection with adult champions outside of school (e.g., family members, community supporters, mentors, etc.).
- ⊗ Elicit interest in enrichment opportunities and leverage school resources (like an external partnerships coordinator) to coordinate these opportunities.
- ⊗ Consider fostering learning alliances and engagement through:
 - Challenge/stretch assignments
 - Internship/independent study
 - A mentor in a field they're interested in or something they care about

LIMITED



HIGH

CURRENT SUCCESS



Effective Academic Conferencing in Practice

The following section explains the steps involved in effective conferencing as outlined in the [Academic Conferencing Protocol \(see Appendix A\)](#).

Each step is executed through a positive youth development lens. The primary person is always cognizant that their effectiveness at any step in the process is dependent on the authenticity of the relationship and the trust they are consistently building with the student. The primary person holds the student accountable for meeting expectations, embodies the warm demander approach, and provides appropriate supports and resources based on the student's specific needs and circumstances.



1. Pre-work (student preparation).

The goal of the pre-work is to build capacity for students to take ownership over their own learning. This will be a journey of varying lengths for different students. The pre-work students complete before conferences consists of three elements:

- ④ **Reflection.** Students review their goal from the previous session, articulate the strategy they employed to pursue the goal, assess their success meeting the goal, and reflect on the reasons for either meeting or not meeting the goal.
- ④ **Assessment.** Students examine current coursework, document what they are working on across subjects (or in targeted subjects), and assess areas where things are going well, where they are struggling or confused, and whether they are being sufficiently challenged.

- ④ **Goal-setting.** Students identify meaningful, attainable goals that they want to work on over a discrete period of time.

The Student Preparation Form is a template that the primary person can adapt based on each student's readiness to drive their learning journey. The primary person may decide to have some students only provide reflection as their pre-work, and then in conference collaborate on assessment and goal setting, working toward growing the student's responsibility to take on more pre-work over time. Other students may be ready for highly specific goal-setting, using the SMART framework (described below). Individualization is key.

2. Connect and Assess.

The first few minutes of the academic conference are an important time for relationship building. Starting the meeting with informal conversation gives the primary person a chance to affirm care and concern for the student, and gain insight into the student's current state of mind regarding school and the larger context of their life. The primary person can transition into a more structured assessment by asking the student about highs and lows from the past week or even asking them to rank their recent experiences, academically or otherwise, based on what is understood about the student's interests and current circumstances.

As the primary person and student review the pre-work together at the start of the conference, the primary person uses their understanding of where the student falls within the engagement/success matrix to adapt their approach to the session. It is always important to celebrate any success immediately. This might include noting that the student simply came to the conference or came on time, completed pre-work, or shared a personal interest with the primary person. The goal is to launch the student into a successful cycle from the outset of the conference. Authentic praise and celebration are important components of the warm demander approach and should be employed consistently and in line with the needs of the student.

3. Goal-Focused Work.

The bulk of an academic conference is spent reflecting on goal attainment, examining student data, and setting goals for ongoing achievement. It is during this part of the conference that the primary person can manage the switch between adult- and student-directed work and navigate the tension between ensuring tactical success and setting appropriately high expectations. Springpoint has found the following three-step approach especially effective:

④ **Goal Review.** Reviewing the pre-work provides an opportunity to determine the student's self-assessment of what they accomplished since the last meeting. Did they implement the strategy they identified to meet their selected goal? Did they achieve the identified goal? What worked well for them, and what did not work out? Support the student to discuss the successes or challenges they faced and what they perceived made progress possible or obstructed success.

④ **Data Dive.** Having access to real-time student data is a great advantage in academic conferencing. The opportunity to examine academic data with a student grounds the experience in relevant, timely information. The primary person may have a database they can refer to and review with students, or may have to do some leg work in advance to gather the necessary information. Examining data provides an opportunity for the student and the primary person to compare the student's subjective experience with other relevant information and reflect on the student's efforts and achievements. What do the data suggest about where the student is making progress and should be celebrated, and where might additional focus, support, or resources help promote growth?

- ⊗ **Goal Setting.** A thorough and thoughtful review of student data will lead organically to the next step in the process as the primary person and student work together to set new goals. New goals should be meaningful, aligned with a student’s context and needs, and targeted in a way that promotes both stretch and success. Goals should address what the student and advisor together believe will move the student past an identified obstacle, and should follow the **SMART** protocol: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound:



- S Specific** - simple, clear, and concrete
- M Measurable** - completion of an assignment or % of tasks, targeted increase in grade point average, etc.
- A Achievable** - ambitious but attainable; with good effort, the student will complete the goal
- R Relevant** - high leverage, aligned to areas of need
- T Time bound** - clear time-frame for completion

Example: Smart Goals

NON-EXEMPLAR GOAL	EXEMPLAR GOAL
Catch up on ELA work.	⊗ In ELA, read the exemplar story and identify 3 literary techniques from the class list of techniques for the dystopian literature project by Friday.

Example: Smart Goal Strategies

NON-EXEMPLAR STRATEGY	EXEMPLAR STRATEGY
Use the time between going home from school and going to work to do the assignment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊗ Take out the class list of literary techniques and the practice exemplar annotations that we created together. ⊗ Read through and make 3 more annotations and then check them against our exemplar. ⊗ Complete the handout asking you to share which 3 literary techniques you identified using evidence from the text. ⊗ Instead of playing pick-up basketball tomorrow afternoon, use this time to complete the assignment.

4. Codify and Activate.

Before closing out the conference, the primary person makes sure that the student can articulate their goal and then recap the strategy they will use to achieve it. It's also valuable for the primary person to check in for any big takeaways or lessons learned from the session and schedule the next meeting. The close of the conference is another important touchpoint to communicate care and concern and build trust. The primary person invests in a cycle of success for the student by closing the conference with words of praise, expectations of success, and reminders of support and availability.

The primary person invests in a cycle of success for the student by closing the conference with words of praise, expectations of success, and reminders of support and availability.

CASE STUDY

Academic Conferencing at CREC Impact Academy

CREC Impact Academy, a Springpoint partner school based in Hartford, CT, serves students who are off track toward graduation using a project based model. Academic conferencing is a component of a thriving primary person model at the school. Social Worker Athania Ramos acts as a primary person for a caseload of students, using many of the strategies and tools outlined in this publication.

One student in Athania's caseload is Leo. Throughout 2019, Athania and Leo met weekly to discuss Leo's academic progress. In addition to his core "brick and mortar" courses, Leo was taking a course on an online platform called Odyssey. Athania worked to build a relationship with Leo and focused concretely on helping him improve his work completion for the Odyssey economics course because his progress had stalled.



[Watch this video](#), which shows Athania focusing in on a specific, narrow, and concrete action step: to complete the first part of one assignment. This clear focus helps Leo take action that is both important and doable to catalyze feelings and beliefs of efficacy.



Supporting Primary People in Implementing Academic Conferencing

Professional development and coaching of practitioners in the effective implementation of academic conferencing is critical.

A proficient primary person understands the interplay between nurturing a warm relationship and holding students accountable for academic expectations; knows how to correctly differentiate students and align a conferencing approach to students' changing needs; and can help students move toward independence and ownership of their own academic success. Springpoint has developed indicators and a number of tools that coaches can use to structure observations and feedback regarding conference implementation ([see Appendix C](#)).

To sustain high-quality, effective academic conferencing, the practice needs to be woven into the fabric of the school. All school personnel understand and respect the value of conferencing time and view it as an essential tool for students' academic success. Conferencing has to be an expected part of what the school delivers and how it ensures student success. It should be as institutionalized as science and social studies instruction. We have found three elements to be key to launching and sustaining a strong academic conferencing program school-wide: school-wide investment, a primary person manager, and access to student data.

School-wide Investment

The entire school believes in the primary person model and the value of a strong conferencing practice. In this type of environment, school leaders and staff understand and embrace the philosophy underlying the model and fully support its implementation. There is also a shared and solid grounding in the rationale for the model, its foundation in positive youth development and, especially, its fundamental connection to educational equity. Sharing the work of Zaretta Hammond, which so clearly articulates the relationships among high expectations, warm and caring relationships with students, learning partnerships and student independence, can be especially valuable in this regard.

Student investment is an equally critical piece of the puzzle. Students can be highly effective supporters of the model once they begin to see results from their efforts. As students begin to see small successes, these will translate into moments of authentic self-efficacy. This kick-starts a cycle of success for students, which then snowballs, positively affecting classroom performance, enhancing the classroom environment for teachers, and ultimately the overall school climate.

A Primary Person Manager

It is critical that there be one person in the school who is accountable for the success of the primary person system and the effective implementation of an academic conferencing practice. It is the primary person manager's job to make sure that there is a conferencing system that includes every student and that the key elements of the practice are implemented well and with consistency. Part of this responsibility is making sure that there is dedicated time in the school schedule for primary people to meet with the students in their caseload. Primary people and students should know that there is dedicated time for conferencing, and school leadership—in collaboration with the primary person manager—ensures that conferencing time is built into the day and does not get pushed aside. The primary person manager assigns conferencing relationships, ensuring that caseloads are balanced based on where students fall within the matrix. In other words, no single advisor should have an abundance of students who are not yet engaged and not yet succeeding while another has a preponderance of students who are demonstrating high engagement and success.

The primary person manager develops a scope and sequence of professional learning touchpoints to support ongoing skill-building for those implementing

the practice; oversees implementation; and coaches primary people on their practice utilizing a clear and transparent set of expectations. Primary people are most successful when they receive frequent coaching and professional development on the specific skills of effective conferencing. The Protocol for Observing Academic Conferencing provides step-by-step guidance and a set of tools to support effective observation and feedback generation. The tool covers four critical skills that coaches can focus on:

- 1 Building relationships and training students on the academic conferencing model;
- 2 Differentiating for each student and strategically managing time with students;
- 3 Getting narrow and concrete with goal setting and strategies; and
- 4 Getting students to develop awareness of and reflect on the skills they are learning so they can transfer them to new situations and foster ongoing success.

Access to Student Data

Ideally, primary people have access to a shared database and can review real-time student data with young people during conferences. If this is not possible, then the primary people will have to build time into their schedule to acquire meaningful data for each student in their caseload so they can review data that is relevant to the students' stated goals at each conference.

In addition, the primary person manager should look at data to understand the impact of academic conferencing on student outcomes and champion the results so the entire school community understands

the relationship between conferencing and student success. Looking at student data comprehensively — and disaggregating by key demographic factors — can also help schools ensure that the practice is being implemented with equity, identify any gaps in implementation, and determine the most effective primary people who can act as practice exemplars and help build high-quality conferencing skills school-wide.



Conclusion: Supporting Every Student to Succeed

Academic conferencing within a strong primary person system can truly be transformative for students. When applied effectively, implemented consistently, and prioritized as one of a school's core systems of support for all students, the model is a strong driver of academic success and student empowerment.

When students regularly participate in high-quality conferencing, they are positioned to more effectively build confidence, connect to school, and become invested as they experience the care and concern of an authentic learning partnership.

The learning partnership and the targeted, goal- and data-driven strategies of academic conferencing ensure that every student has an opportunity to meet right-sized goals, experience success, and move forward on their own academic path. The practice leverages each young person's desire to build meaningful relationships and drive toward mastery and identity formation. This means that implementing and sustaining a strong academic conferencing practice is an effective way to embed and institutionalize a positive youth development approach school-wide.

If the practice is to have a meaningful impact on educational equity, then its school-wide implementation is essential. The practice is designed to be a system that touches every student in the school. This ensures that the rigor of high expectations, the accountability of setting and meeting goals, and the support of a consistent positive relationship are available and utilized by every single student without exception.



Conferencing levels the playing field, “reducing” as Zaretta Hammond would note, “the predictability of who succeeds and who fails,”⁴ making academic success a reality for every kind of learner. The practice empowers students, who come to embrace learning, believe they can succeed, and are motivated to persevere through challenging work, become independent learners, ready to share their skills, talents, interests, and passions with their communities and the world.

⁴ Hammond, Z.L. *A Conversation About Instructional Equity with Zaretta Hammond*. Collaborative Circle. Alameda, CA. <https://www.collaborativeclassroom.org/blog/a-conversation-about-instructional-equity-with-zaretta-hammond/>

Appendix A

Academic Conferencing Protocol

THE GOALS OF A ACADEMIC CONFERENCE:

- ⊗ Develop a specific **goal** and **strategy** for the next 1-2 weeks.
- ⊗ Build trusting student-teacher relationships.
- ⊗ Catalyze a virtuous cycle of progress and success.

Phase/Time	Prompts
Pre-Work	Consider using a pre-work template such as this sample to support student preparation.
Connect and Assess (2 mins)	You might ask: <ul style="list-style-type: none">⊗ What was your high and low from last week?⊗ On a scale of 1-5, how are you doing — academically and socially/emotionally?
Goal Review: ZOOM IN on Last Week's Goal (2-3 mins)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">⊗ What was last week's goal and strategy?⊗ Did you accomplish the goal? <i>Note: be sure to always praise and celebrate progress, even if just for showing up, getting back in the game and persisting.</i>⊗ Why or why not? <i>Prompting questions include: What is working? What's getting in your way or what are you stuck on?</i>
Data Dive: ZOOM OUT and Examine the Data (2 mins)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">⊗ What do all the academic data say? What aspect of your academic performance should we focus on?<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Is there anything that's really outstanding/going well in the data we should celebrate?▪ What in the data are we looking to address?▪ What should we focus on this week?
Goal Setting: ZOOM BACK IN - Set Next Week's Goal and Strategy (6 mins)	<p>This protocol is designed to guide a primary person in guiding an academic conference in partnership with a student. It can and should be adapted based on the relationship and student need but provides a general framework for a successful academic conference.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">⊗ So this week we are going to focus on [project or assignment].⊗ Let's look at the root cause. What might hold you back? (e.g., homework, time management, big assignments that feel intimidating, academic content or skill that you need help with, etc.)⊗ Let's get concrete. Can we look at [the project, assignment, draft, LMS, etc.]?⊗ What's the specific goal?<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Can we make sure this is specific, measurable, and time-bound?⊗ Now let's develop the strategy.<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Can we get concrete? Let's look at [your schedule, the assignment itself, where you think you might get stuck, etc.]▪ So what are the steps you need to take to attain the goal?
Codify and Activate (1 min)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">⊗ Can you recap the goal and strategy?⊗ What are your big "aha's" from today? What did you learn today?⊗ When is our next meeting?

Appendix B

Academic Conferencing Student Preparation

Part I - Reflection on Goals

My goal from last meeting



My strategy



Circle one: I achieved this goal / I didn't achieve this goal yet

Reflect: Either share what actions/choices/help enabled you to achieve your goal
OR if you did not yet achieve your entire goal, what got in your way?



Part II - What Am I Working on This Week?

What is happening right now in your classes?

Course	Example: Math			
What we are working on	Example: Reviewing order of operations			
How's it going? (Is it going ok? Need more of a challenge? Are you confused?)	Example: I may need more of a challenge			

Part III - Looking Ahead and Setting a New Goal

Looking at how things are going, what might be ONE area to work on? What do you want to accomplish over the next week in this one course? What is one ambitious but attainable and meaningful "SMART" goal you want to set?

Draft of my SMART Goal:



Academic Conference Coaching

This tool intends to help coaches and supervisors as they support primary people who are conducting academic conferences with students. We recommend that coaches adapt their support and vary coaching frequency based on the needs of those they are supporting.

As coaches and supervisors seek to support primary people, it is important that they have an opportunity to observe academic conferences through an in-person visit or through the a recording of an academic conference. Once an observation or a recording is scheduled, we recommend coaches use these steps and accompanying structures.

- ⓧ **Step 1:** Use the Criteria for Success and take notes throughout the conference.
- ⓧ **Step 2:** Create your own “[back pocket notes](#)” after you observe or watch the conference.
- ⓧ **Step 3:** Meet with the primary person to debrief—[copy a blank chart from here](#)—consider creating “rolling notes” to add to each time you meet.

At the end of the meeting, be sure to schedule the next observation/recording and continue the cycle.



Step 1: Criteria for Success

These elements and look fors establish the basis of a strong academic conference with a student. As a coach observes a live or recorded academic conference, this document can help them identify concrete strategies and examples of “glows” and “grows”. Unearthing a primary person’s strengths can help them build upon those strengths while areas for growth can form the basis of action steps to drive a primary person’s development and success.

Foundational Elements & Look Fors

Criteria	Look for(s)	Notes
Pre-work and Provisioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⓧ Has the student completed the necessary pre-work and come ready to reflect on specific data points and actions from the past 1-2 weeks? ⓧ Has the advisor examined the pre-work? ⓧ Do the student and advisor have all the necessary data at their fingertips? 	
Apply a Matrix-based Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⓧ Has the advisor gathered enough data to accurately locate the student in the academic conferencing matrix in order to differentiate support and are they coaching according to the strategy articulated in the matrix? 	
Sticking to the Script /Leveraging the Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⓧ Does the advisor use the core prompts in the protocol, and largely stick to the script while being responsive to the student? 	
Pacing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⓧ Does the advisor economize their language, prompt the student to talk first, and use a timer in order to balance depth and efficiency? ⓧ Is the conference no more than 15 minutes long? 	

Effective Facilitation

Criteria	Look for(s)	Notes
Effusive Praise of Progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the advisor effusively praise and validate progress and/or showing up? 	
Student Heavy Lifting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who does the bulk of the talking/thinking in the meeting - the advisor or the student? Does the advisor use universal prompts to follow-up and encourage the student to explain their thinking? (e.g., Why do you think that? Say more about _____. What do you mean by _____?) 	
Getting Narrow and Concrete	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do the students and advisor drill down and get specific and concrete on one area to focus on? (e.g., If the student says their strategy is to ask for help, does the teacher prompt them to get specific and concrete?) Does the advisor look at specific data and/or the details of assignments in order to develop the goal and strategy? Does the conference dig into the specifics of the data and the assignments, or does it talk around the specifics in vague and general terms? 	
Reflection and Transfer of Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the advisor prompt the student to reflect about what they are learning from successes and challenges? Does the advisor prompt the student to think about how they can transfer learnings to new situations? When appropriate, does the advisor provide opportunities to connect the work in academic conferencing to their longer term goals, dreams, and aspirations? 	

Meeting Outcomes

Criteria	Look for(s)	Notes
SMART Goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the conference produce a SMART goal? Is that goal meaningful and high leverage given the time of year, the students' interests/needs, etc.? 	
Specific Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the student walk out of the meeting with a specific strategy about how to achieve the goal? 	
Warm/Demanding Rapport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there evidence that the academic conference has helped to build a caring and trusting relationship between student and advisor? Does the advisor frame care for the student in terms of both personal wellbeing and high expectations? 	

Primary Person:

Date of Visit:

Step 2/3: Reflect & Plan

Coaches can use this to guide their agenda when meeting with the primary person. We recommend that the coach do some of their own thinking before to have some “back pocket” suggestions (step 2). Then, they will build this out together, with the primary person going first (step 3).

Reflect - Build this out together

Raise the Roof

What went well and should be celebrated?



Raise the Bar

What are areas to work on?



Prioritize - What's the most important, highest leverage thing to zoom in on?

Name the Gap(s)

Get specific about the highest leverage area to work on with evidence from the conference.

What is the Impact?

How is this gap impacting the outcomes of the academic conference?

Create an Action Step

What is a concrete and actionable next step?

Plan the Follow-through

When is this happening? Are we planning for it together now? Will you share your plan and then invite me to your next meeting?



Make sure action steps and follow through plans are SMART!

- S** **Specific** - simple, clear, and concrete
- M** **Measurable** - completion of an assignment or % of tasks, targeted increase in grade point average, etc.
- A** **Achievable** - ambitious but attainable; with good effort, the student will complete the goal
- R** **Relevant** - high leverage, aligned to areas of need
- T** **Time-bound** - clear time-frame for completion

Warm Demander Chart

From *Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain* by Zaretta Hammond (p99)

