



What Are Student Portfolios?

How do we know when high school students are prepared to succeed in adult life? How can teachers accurately determine whether students have acquired essential but hard-to-measure skills such as critical thinking, group collaboration, or the ability to develop a plan and follow through? How can schools maintain **high academic expectations** for all students while also offering a variety of interesting, motivating, and creative learning experiences?

These are some of the most important but complex and challenging questions in public education today.

The good news is that thousands of schools and teachers throughout the country are tackling and solving these problems every day.

One strategy they are using is the student portfolio.

What You Need To Know

A student portfolio is a compilation of academic work and other forms of educational evidence assembled for the purpose of evaluating and reflecting on learning progress, academic achievement, and skill acquisition over time, while also creating a lasting archive of academic work products and accomplishments. Portfolios come in many forms, from notebooks filled with documents, notes, and graphics to online digital archives and student-created websites.

- **Student portfolios are most effective when they are used to evaluate learning progress and achievement.** If portfolios are merely manila folders that students dump work into because the teacher told them to, they likely won't have a positive impact on a student's education. Portfolios are most effective when they are used to document and evaluate the knowledge, skills, and work habits students acquire in school, and when teachers use them to inform and adjust instructional techniques.
- **Portfolios help teachers evaluate learning progress over time.** Tests and quizzes only tell teachers what students know at a particular point in time, but portfolios can be used to document how students have grown, matured, and improved as learners over the course of a project, a school year, or even multiple years.
- **Portfolios help teachers determine whether students can apply what they have learned to new problems and different subject areas.** A test may determine, for example, whether students have learned a specific mathematical skill. But can those students also apply that skill to challenging problems in economics, civics, or history? Can they use it to conduct a statistical analysis of a large data set in a spreadsheet? Student portfolios help teachers determine whether students have acquired the multidisciplinary skills they need to succeed in college, careers, and civic life.
- **Portfolios encourage students to take more ownership and responsibility over their education.** Because portfolios document learning growth over time, they can help students critique and assess the quality of their own work, and help them reflect on where they started a course, how they developed, and where they ended up at the conclusion of the school year.

A high-quality education has never been more important than it is right now.

The **New England Secondary School Consortium** hopes that our **Leadership in Action** series will spark conversations across the region about how students could be learning in today's high schools.

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