I Want to Know More

A Leadership in Action Supplement

I Want to Know More is a selection of information and resources for education leaders, parents, and community members who want to learn more about the teaching and learning strategies taking place in today's most innovative schools.

What Are 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.

> If you want to get a quick sense of how student portfolios are used in a classroom, watch **this useful Youtube video**, created by Robin Mairs, a U.S. history teacher at Dana Hills High School in Dana Point, California, which describes one approach to using student portfolios to organize, assess, and document student learning in a social studies course.

Student Portfolios Explained

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A student portfolio is a compilation of academic work and other forms of educational evidence assembled for the purpose of (1) evaluating coursework quality, learning progress, and academic achievement; (2) determining whether students have met **learning standards** or other academic requirements for courses, grade-level promotion, and graduation; (3) helping students reflect on their academic goals and progress as learners; and (4) creating a lasting archive of academic work products, accomplishments, and other documentation. Advocates of student portfolios argue that compiling, reviewing, and evaluating student work over time can provide a

richer, deeper, and more accurate picture of what students have learned and are able to do than more traditional measures—such as **standardized tests**, quizzes, or final exams—that only measure what students know at a specific point in time.

Portfolios come in many forms, from notebooks filled with documents, notes, and graphics to online digital archives and student-created websites, and they may be used at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Portfolios can be a physical collection of student work that includes materials such as written assignments, journal entries, completed tests, artwork, lab reports, physical projects (such as dioramas or models), and other material evidence of learning progress and academic accomplishment, including awards, honors, certifications, recommendations, written evaluations by teachers or peers, and self-reflections written by students. Portfolios may also be digital archives, presentations, blogs, or websites that feature the same materials as physical portfolios, but that may also include content such as student-created videos, multimedia presentations, spreadsheets, websites, photographs, or other digital artifacts of learning.

Online portfolios are often called digital portfolios or e-portfolios, among other terms. In some cases, blogs or online journals may be maintained by students and include ongoing reflections about learning activities, progress, and accomplishments. Portfolios may also be presented—publicly or privately—to parents, teachers, and community members as part of a **demonstration of learning**, **exhibition**, or **capstone project**.

It's important to note that there are many different types of portfolios in education, and each form has its own purpose. For example, "capstone" portfolios would feature student work completed as part of long-term projects or final assessments typically undertaken at the culmination of a middle school or high school, or at the end of a long-term, possibly multiyear project. Some portfolios are only intended to evaluate learning progress and achievement in a specific course, while others are maintained for the entire time a student is enrolled in a school. And some portfolios are used to assess learning in a specific subject area, while others evaluate the acquisition of skills that students can apply in all subject areas.

The following arguments are often made by educators who advocate for the use of portfolios in the classroom:

- **Student portfolios are most effective when they are used to evaluate student learning progress and achievement.** When portfolios are used to document and evaluate the knowledge, skills, and work habits students acquire in school, teachers can use them to adapt instructional strategies when evidence shows that students either are or are not learning what they were taught. Advocates typically contend that portfolios should be integrated into and inform the instructional process, and students should incrementally build out portfolios on an ongoing basis—i.e., a portfolio should not merely be an idle archive of work products that's only reviewed at the end of a course or school year.

- **Portfolios can help teachers monitor and evaluate learning progress over time.** Tests and quizzes give teachers information about what students know at a particular point in time, but portfolios can document how students have grown, matured, and improved as learners over the course of a project, school year, or multiple years. For this reason, some educators argue that portfolios should not just be compilations of a student's best work, but rather they should include evidence and work products that demonstrate how students improved over time. For example, multiple versions of an essay can show how students revised and improved their work based on feedback from the teachers or their peers.

- **Portfolios help teachers determine whether students can apply what they have learned to new problems and different subject areas.** A test can help teachers determine, for example, whether students have learned a specific mathematical skill. But can those students also apply that skill to a complex problem in economics, geography, civics, or history? Can they use it to conduct a statistical analysis of a large data set in a spreadsheet? Or can they use it to develop a better plan for a hypothetical business? Educators may call this ability to apply skills and knowledge to novel problems and different domains "**transfer of learning**." Similarly, portfolios can also be used to evaluate student work and learning in non-school contexts. For example, if students participate in an internship or complete a project under the guidance of an expert mentor from the community, they could create portfolios over the course of these learning activities and submit them to their teachers or school as evidence they have met certain learning expectations or graduation requirements.

- **Portfolios can encourage students to take more ownership and responsibility over the learning process.** In some schools, portfolios are a way for students to critique and evaluate their own work and academic progress, often during the process of deciding what will be included in their portfolios. Because portfolios document learning growth over time, they can help students reflect on where they started a course, how they developed, and where they ended up at the conclusion of the school year. When reviewing a portfolio, teachers may also ask students to articulate the connection between particular work products and the academic expectations and goals for a course. For these reasons, advocates of portfolios often recommend that students be involved in determining what goes into a portfolio, and that teachers should not unilaterally make the decisions without involving students. For related discussions, see **student engagement** and **student voice**.

- **Portfolios can improve communication between teachers and parents.** Portfolios can also help parents become more informed about the education and learning progress of their children, what is being taught in a particular course, and what students are doing and learning in the classroom. Advocates may also contend that when parents are more informed about and engaged in their child's education, they can play a more active role in supporting their children at home, which could have a beneficial affect on academic achievement and long-term **student outcomes**.

Debate

While portfolios are not generally controversial in concept, it's possible that skepticism, criticism, and debate may arise if portfolios are viewed as burdensome, add-on requirements rather than as a vital instructional strategy and assessment option. Portfolios may also be viewed negatively if they are poorly designed and executed, if they tend to be filed away and forgotten, if they are not actively maintained by students, if they are not meaningfully integrated into the school's academic program, if educators do not use them to inform and adjust their instructional techniques, or if sufficient time is not provided during the school day for teachers and students to review and discuss them. In short, how portfolios are actually used or not used in schools, and whether they produce the desired educational results, will likely determine how they are perceived.

Creating, maintaining, and assessing student portfolios can also be a time-consuming endeavor. For this reason and others, some critics may contend that portfolios are not a practical or feasible option for use in large-scale evaluations of school and student performance. (Just imagine, for example, what it would require in terms of funding, time, and human resources to evaluate dozens or hundreds of pages of academic documentation produced by each of the of tens of thousands of eleventh-grade students scattered across a state in any given year.)

Standardized tests, in contrast, are relatively efficient and inexpensive to score, and test results are considered more reliable or comparable across students, schools, or states, given that there is less chance that error, **bias**, or inconsistency may occur during the scoring process (in large part because most standardized tests today are scored in full or in part by automated machines, computers, or online programs). Student portfolios are a comparably time-consuming—and therefore far more expensive—assessment strategy because they require human scorers, and it is also far more challenging to maintain consistent and reliable evaluations of student achievement across different scorers. Many advocates would argue, however, that portfolios are not intended for use in large-scale evaluations of school and student performance, and that they provide the greatest educational value at the classroom level where teachers have personal relationships and conversations with students, and where in-depth feedback from teachers can help students grow, improve, and mature as learners.