

**Portfolio Assessment:  
A Guide For Teachers And Administrators**

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## ABSTRACT

**This article examines the use of portfolios as a means of assessing elementary-aged students. The advantages and disadvantages of portfolio-based assessment are discussed and the parameters, guidelines, and the necessary conditions for implementing a portfolio-based assessment process are examined. Recommendations for establishing portfolios as an essential component in a comprehensive assessment process are provided.**

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## Introduction

Educators of elementary school children today are becoming more and more dissatisfied and frustrated with the use of standardized tests as a method of assessment (Hansen, 1993). This dissatisfaction with standardized tests has been brought about because of our changing views of the reading process and inconsistencies between how we teach and how children learn (Cskiszentmihalyi, 1990, Gardner, 1983, 1984; Kotulak, 1996; Sheridan & Worf, 1991; Smith, 1998; Whang & Waters, 2001). Standardized tests often do not reflect a student's reading ability, but rather a limited set of subskills (Farr, 1992). The pressure of accountability is also encouraging teachers, to focus their instruction on preparing their students for these tests (Elmore, 1991). This preparatory instruction (teaching the test or teaching to the test) often has little to do with how students learn or with preparing students to effectively demonstrate the knowledge and skills they have acquired. Our changing views of the learning process, and the dramatic changes in today's instructional methods demand that assessments become more child-centered. Indeed, Marx (2001) states that schools of the future will have to focus on ensuring that all students from our diverse school population grow academically. In essence, the average performance district or grade level will no longer suffice. Rather, schools will be responsible for all students achieving performance standards.

Indeed, Blackbourn, Hamby, Hanshaw, and Beck (1997) state that authentic, child-centered assessments are the basis of ongoing quality improvement in educational settings. Marx (2001) supports this contention and suggests portfolio-based assessment as a viable means of individualized, student-centered evaluation. Portfolio assessment has the potential to improve the complex task of student assessment, as well as to contribute to a more positive attitude toward the educational process. Many professionals today are becoming more aware that portfolios, as a continuous evaluation tool, present an effective choice for the improvement of instruction (Johns & VanLeirsburg, 1993). According to Mitchell (1992), portfolios are becoming the most well known form of performance assessment being used from kindergarten through graduate school.

Portfolios are essentially different from other forms of assessment in that they make it possible to document the unfolding process of teaching and learning over time

(Wolf, 1991). They are a dynamic ongoing assessment that aids in stimulating thinking and promoting student independence. The use of portfolio-based assessment allows students to reflect, evaluate, and set future learning goals by thoughtfully selecting samples from different areas to be included (Tierney, 1992). Implementation of such authentic assessments allows parents, teacher, administrators, students, and other stakeholders to be provided with directly observable products and understandable evidence concerning student performance (Widgeons, 1990).

A portfolio must be more than just a collection of test results, journal entries, homework, graphs of student performance, or the products of student activities. It must be systematic, organized evidence which is used by the teacher and student to measure growth of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Varvus, 1990). Goals and objectives for the portfolios must be set a priori and the contents negotiated by individual teachers and students rather than set by committee, board, or building administrators (Gomez, Grave, & Block, 1991). In essence, portfolios must not only reflect teacher and/or school-based standards, but also student interest and individual learning styles.

Yancey (1992) supports the notion that portfolios should be designed by teachers and students. The author also states that a periodic portfolio review by which one can learn more about teaching and learning is a necessity. At the present time, unless mandated with the components with the components strictly outlined, portfolio-based assessment is just about whatever an individual teacher wants it to be. Because the portfolio approach to assessment is a relatively new concept, which is viewed as more subjective and qualitative than other kinds of new research into how students learn (Jasmine, 1992). This component must be in place to ensure that portfolio requirements reflect current research on human learning and brain-based best practices.

School administrators must also provide support, both moral as well as financial, for school initiatives such as portfolio-based assessment. It is essential that administrators be convinced of the importance for change in improving the assessment/ evaluation process (Gullo, 1994) as well as being committed to initiating and managing such fundamental change.

According to Batzle (1992), administrators can help teachers make this change by trusting the teachers and by providing the kind of environment in which they can develop professionally. Facilitative and/or transformational leaders (Lashaway, 1997) both possess the requisite skills to create and maintain those conditions necessary for successful change and personnel development related to the use of portfolios (Blackbourn, Blackbourn, Papasan, & Vinson, 2001). First, philosophy must be examined. Secondly, a discussion of the community is essential. Parents and parental feedback are a vital part of this type of assessment approach. In order to work and be effective, parents must play a major role. In addition, goals for a particular session must reflect philosophy as well as the individual needs of children. Administrators must work closely with teachers in this area. Finally, assessment and evaluation must be aligned with instruction, goals, and philosophy.

## GUIDELINES FOR ADMINISTRATORS

1. Remember - It would serve educators well to remember that a student's worth is not measured merely by his/her grades.
2. Support - A principal has the opportunity to provide a supportive, nurturing environment in which to work. This is of utmost importance to teachers in whatever task they may choose to undertake.
3. Education - As a principal, provide opportunities for workshops, training, staff development, research, etc. This is essential in order to be well informed of changes.
4. Conferences - Principals can be very supportive and encouraging during conferences as well as other times. Sit in on conferences with parents and children alike. Offer advice when necessary.
5. Narratives - Know what is going on with this assessment. Even though it is time consuming, take time to read the teacher's narratives from time to time to obtain a full view of the process. These can be very informative and contain a wealth of insight into the child's progress. (So much better than a letter grade.)
6. Information - Keep parents and the community informed. Make sure letters are sent out at the beginning of the year explaining the new assessment process from records to conferences.

A critical element in portfolio assessment involves record keeping. Record keeping in portfolio assessment involves selecting appropriate samples for the portfolios. These samples must be validated by conferencing notes, anecdotal records, narratives, and/or checklists. Most records are for documentation for parents and administrators; the teacher can select representative student work because of their extensive personal knowledge of individual student progress.

As administrators are not as familiar as the teacher with the children, the material included in the portfolio must be condensed. This will allow the administrator to examine the portfolio's contents without actually examining each individual sample of student performance to determine where that student is functioning academically.

Each teacher can devise an individual checklist to be placed at the front of each portfolio to outline the contents of the portfolio. These checklists can take the place of the traditional report card and can be used to condense student performance across an entire grading period to a single page. If further information is necessary, it could be found within the portfolio. Because the administrator plays the primary role in providing teacher support via a non-threatening environment, it is imperative that any teacher using the portfolio assessment process condenses the vast amount of student information into a more manageable format.

## **Problems and Solutions**

In observations and interviews with teachers and principals regarding portfolio assessment, the problems associated with this fairly new approach to assessment are multiple. Teachers and principles interviewed all had some knowledge of this approach, but the degree of understanding varied. Those frequently identified include the following problems.

The time factor was one problem voiced by teachers and principals alike. Teachers were especially concerned with the amount of time this approach involves. While it was agreed that this would require a great investment of time, it was also agreed that any teacher who really knows their students spends many hours after and before school doing record keeping and other non-instructional tasks.

The principals were further concerned as to how they would determine academic performance without actually reviewing each portfolio. The solution suggested for this would be for each teacher to form some kind of checklist to be placed in the front of each portfolio each grading period. This would condense materials down inside the portfolio to a more manageable list for the principle.

Another problem voiced was parental or community support for such a new and unfamiliar system of assessment. Most parents are accustomed to their child receiving a letter grade on a report card at the end of a designated grading period. Such a change could be difficult for parents to accept or adjust to without considerable effort to educate them as to the nature and advantages of the new system.

In talking with teachers who are presently using this method of assessment, conferencing was identified as an essential part of the portfolio assessment process. Parents initially made aware of what was going to transpire with the new assessment method at the beginning of the school year. Thereafter, at least once a month, parents were invited in to discuss and view their child's portfolio with the teacher. Teachers stated that once parents are made aware of this method, most are very open, accepting, and cooperated fully. Parents are an essential part of this assessment process and must be included as equal partners and stakeholders.

An additional problem encountered was how to set standards for the portfolios. It was suggested that each individual teacher should set their own criteria based on meeting the objectives set forth by the state-mandated curriculum and district mission, vision, and goals.

A further concern was the lack of knowledge or training necessary for implementing portfolio-based student assessment. In order for this form of assessment to be effective, teachers must be trained in the various aspects of the approach. If teachers are simply given directions to implement portfolio assessment and mandated to do so without the proper preparation, it is doomed to failure. Just as teachers were trained in their specific discipline and/or content area, they must also have training in the portfolio approach to assessment. Once trained and the plan implemented, there must also be follow-up training sessions through staff development. All participants must be kept abreast of developing research. Additionally, teachers must have a vested interest in adopting the portfolio assessment process. A mandated program lacking faculty support

will fail despite extensive training of the highest quality. Administrative mandate lacking faculty support will result in a perception of "heavy handedness," a lack of administrative concern, and a leadership style that focuses on incidental, popular concepts rather than fundamental issues.

A final issue related to the use of portfolio-based assessment involves the current status and role of traditional, standardized testing (especially high stakes testing related to promotion and graduation). Such testing often places specific groups of children at a distinct disadvantage (i.e., those of minority background, from nontraditional families, possessing a learning disability, or who suffer from chronic, ongoing conditions of poverty). While all schools (rural, urban, and suburban) suffer in this manner, urban schools consistently seem to bear the brunt of these adverse conditions. High stakes testing of students at risk for academic failure (students who appear in prodigious numbers in urban school districts) is a practice which, given the numbers of such students, the lack of critical resources, and the dearth of fully certified teachers and/or administrators, is highly questionable. If poor performance on such tests led to fundamental, systemic improvement or to continuous modification of school organizational processes, then their use would be justified. However, such assessments focus on teachers, administrators, students, and parents who are subservient to the process (processes which in themselves, not the individuals involved in them, largely determine outcomes), which is determined by their schools' operational activities. The tests basically punish teachers, students, administrators, and parents based upon outcomes over which they have little or no control. Poor performance on this high stakes tests can result in failure for students to graduate on schedule (or graduate at all), dismissal or teachers, removal of administrators, and undue emotional and financial stress on parents.

Portfolio-based assessment offers a viable alternative to traditional, standardized, high stakes testing. It provides a means for those students at risk for academic failure to demonstrate progress within a format less restrictive and inflexible than the traditional means. The portfolio-based assessment method also allows the student to demonstrate specific skills within the context in which they were taught rather than within the context determined by the test constructors. Urban schools and their leadership could better meet student needs and accountability requirements via the use of portfolios.

As this new approach is relatively untried, much research needs to be conducted concerning the validity and reliability of this method. Just what is it that we expect, as professionals, from this approach? Is this method more functional for the students academically? How do our expectations differ from those of parents? Is this method more functional for students academically? Can this approach promote more positive attitudes toward learning among students? How can growth be accurately measured? How can students' performance be related to curricular/instructional objectives?

Research into the efficacy of portfolio-based assessment has just begun. Extensive, ongoing research is a critical component in the process of this approach's validation. The shortcomings of the traditional methods of classroom assessment and standardized testing must be adequately addressed and supported with a strong research base for portfolio-based assessment to be widely adopted.

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Koretz found that portfolio assessment was not all that useful in evaluating schools or students because one school might require one kind of project, another school quite a different one. It was difficult to compare their work and determine whether the standards were high enough.Â Most critics of portfolio assessment say they like the emphasis on demonstrated writing and oral skill, but have seen too many instances in which a refusal to give traditional tests of factual recall leads to charmingly written essays with little concrete information to support their arguments. Advocates of portfolios respond that such lapses can be blamed on bad teaching, but not on the use of portfolios, since if portfolios are used properly they can also lead students to master a broad range of material. School administrators and teachers are being challenged on many fronts to demonstrate accountability through assessment, from early childhood through secondary education. Despite an explosion of demand, the underlying principles of sound assessment such as the valid use of examination results, their reliability, their efficiency in terms of teachers' and students' time, and their ethical use are often neglected. Addressed to in-service and pre-service teachers and administrators, this book reorders educational priorities, emphasizing the relation of what is taught to what is tested,