Evaluations That Ensure Growth: Teacher Portfolios

Portfolios can be used to gauge teacher effectiveness and student achievement, changing teacher evaluations from limited and hollow administrative duties to dynamic processes that improve instruction and build teacher-administrator collegiality.

By Tracy A. McNelly

Although many school administrators understand the need for a better method of teacher evaluation, too many times they are caught in a system that does not allow them the time or freedom to make changes in the assessment process. As a consequence, teacher evaluation continues to be a meaningless and mundane part of a teacher's job and an administrator's responsibility. Recently, however, schools and districts are finding that they can reshape their current system of teacher evaluation so it contributes to the quality of teacher effectiveness and improves student achievement.

The thrust for teacher quality in the United States grew out of the modern school reform movement. In 1996, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future published *What Matters Most: Teaching and America's Future.* This report complemented the standards for students with standards for teachers. More-stringent requirements for teacher licensure and renewal, rigorous testing of teacher knowledge, and closing teacher-education programs that failed to meet national standards began to appear. In fact, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future set forth three assertions about teacher quality:

- Teachers are the most important influence on what students learn
- The central strategy to improving public education is by recruiting, preparing, and retaining good teachers
- School reform will be successful when it focuses on creating conditions in which teachers can teach well

As a consequence of these reports, school districts began focusing on improving teacher quality. What can schools and teachers do to ensure that students are reaching high standards and achieving success? One way can be by providing goal-oriented professional development activities. Another way can be to involve the staff in curriculum design that is data driven and aligned to standards. Both

options provide staff with opportunities to reflect on current teaching and learning theories that are structured around school requirements. Increasingly though, school districts are finding that teacher evaluations can ensure teacher quality and student success.

Definition, Research, and Theory

> A teaching portfolio is a documented history of a teacher's learning process against a set of teaching standards. The portfolio is much more than an elaborate scrapbook or a collection of written documents: It is an individualized portrait of the teacher as a professional, reflecting on his or her philosophy and practice. This portrait is fully realized through the teacher's deliberate selection of artifacts and thoughtful reflections on those artifacts, which provide insight into the teacher's growth. (Painter, 2001, p. 31)

This definition of a teaching portfolio suggests that through the use of teacher portfolios, the teacher's role, once defined as "provider of knowledge" becomes "learner and instructor of knowledge." Portfolios are a method of teacher preparation, professional development, and teacher assessment. They are flexible and also provide a substantive view of what happens in a classroom. Instead of a snapshot, teacher portfolios offer administrators a total picture, from the beginning to the end of the school year. They go where traditional teacher evaluation systems could not. Because of this, teacher portfolios are being used in many educational environments (Riggs & Sandlin, 2000).

Traditional methods of teacher evaluations are criticized not only because of their lack of substance but also because they do not encourage a broader look at teacher skills and knowledge. Instead, they are limited to a brief encounter (Wolf & Dietz, 1998). Consequently, many educational groups are using portfolios to shift from a behaviorist type of teacher assessment to a more constructive teacher assessment. For example, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards includes a portfolio as a part of the assessment process in awarding teachers national certification. And many districts use portfolios to aid in the hiring of new teachers, for merit pay incentives for current teachers (Wolf & Dietz, 1998), and for professional development and evaluation.

Teacher portfolios take many different forms and serve many different purposes. They can range from a binder filled with examples of student and teacher work—including documented parent contacts, tests and quizzes, lesson plans, and student samples—to a few structured items that document particular aspects of the teacher's year. Although these collections of work may contain very different items and may be constructed in various ways, their purpose determines their structure. For example, a portfolio whose purpose is to evaluate student assessment and learning in a classroom would contain samples of teacher-made tests, quizzes and assignments, logs of students' grades, and samples of student work and other information about the teacher's effectiveness. On the other hand, a portfolio whose purpose is to advance professional growth would contain certification of course work and professional development activities and other documents that represent a teacher's learning and reflection.

Choosing a Portfolio Model

> In many schools and districts, the local curriculum is a hodge-podge of individual initiatives knit together by collective good intentions. Administrators and teachers often purchase materials, convene committees, and create curriculum guides with little attention to the relationship of each piece to the whole. Educators act without proper data to guide their decisions, without grounding in research and best practice, and without a plan for turning their vision into a reality. (Carr & Harris, 2001, p. 1)

Carr and Harris present us with a realistic look at why so many school initiatives fail. Although teachers sometimes blame the initiatives on "been there, done that" attitudes, much of the time, school reform fails because of a lack of cohesion and vision from the administration. As with any other new reform, the implementation of teacher portfolios as an evaluative tool requires a clear purpose. Administrators must be able to weave teacher portfolios into all aspects of the school: the vision and mission statement, the curriculum, assessment, and the standards, to name a few. However, this task becomes more difficult given the various purposes and styles of portfolios.

How do schools determine what type of portfolio is appropriate for their districts? All types of portfolios can be useful tools for evaluating teachers. District administrators can first make a decision about the purpose of the portfolio and then select one that fits best with their school vision. In doing so, many questions surrounding the use and implementation of teacher portfolios surface.

Summative or Formative?

When determining the purpose of teacher portfolios, administrators must first ask for what and for whom will the portfolios be used. Will they be used with tenured, seasoned teachers or beginning teachers? Will they be used as evaluative tools to judge teaching capability, to guide teachers' professional growth, or both? Whichever type of portfolio a district elects to adopt, all portfolios should "ultimately advance teacher and student learning" (Wolf & Dietz, 1998, p. 15).

Portfolios that are summative tools require a structured process and a detailed set of assessment components. A summative teacher portfolio should be grounded in a set of standards that are measurable by rubrics and rating scales. The collections of work in the portfolio help provide evidence to the rater if a standard has been met (Danielson & McGreal, 2000). For example, a summative portfolio may assess a teacher's strengths and needs in terms of how well that teacher contributes to family-school connections. Spe-

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cific family-school standards, such as the types of contacts the teacher makes with parents regarding classroom assessments, are evaluated according to a specific rubric that rates the teacher on a continuum of unsatisfactory to advanced. The more parent contacts a teacher has in this area, the higher that teacher's rating.

Portfolios that are used as formative tools, on the other hand, identify teachers' strengths and needs. This type of portfolio is especially practical for nontenured teachers (Riggs & Sandlin, 2000). As with summative portfolios, formative portfolios should link all learning activities to district-developed standards (Danielson & McGreal, 2000). Assessments for these types of portfolios are open-ended and do not rely on strict rubrics. Instead, teachers show their work collected over the past school year as evidence that they met certain standards. For example, a district may ask teachers to engage in various professional development activities throughout the year and to show that these activities improved their practice. In formative portfolios, teachers choose how to show evidence of their growth, such as college transcripts and journal entries. Formative portfolios allow teachers freedom in their professional growth.

Learning or Assessment?

Instead of making a choice between summative and formative portfolios, districts may opt to focus the purpose of their teacher portfolio in another direction. Although similar to summative and formative portfolios, learning and assessment portfolios draw on specific elements of teaching.

Learning portfolios exhibit collections of teachers' work that focus on self-assessment. The purpose of such a portfolio is to encourage professional growth and teacher learning. Learning portfolios give teachers opportunities to set goals about their teaching styles and strategies and to collect information about and to reflect on their successes and failures. For example, a learning portfolio may include verification that a goal was chosen, teacher reflection journals, and evidence of how the teacher might have altered the learning environment after realizing that his or her original plan didn't work. Learning portfolios are typically loosely structured, and each specific teacher determines the content and format of his or her portfolio. Although this type of portfolio's strengths are its flexibility, its limitation is that it does not provide a complete picture of what has happened during the school year (Wolf & Deitz, 1998).

Assessment portfolios are considerably different from learning portfolios. Whereas learning portfolios are flexible, assessment portfolios are rigid. The contents of learning portfolios are determined mainly by individual teachers, but the contents of assessment portfolios adhere to a set of specific guidelines. Although the purpose of learning portfolios is self-reflection, the purpose of assessment portfolios is formal evaluation. Assessment portfolios typically follow a set of guidelines that are set by school districts or organizations, such as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Districts that elect to use this type of portfolio as an evaluative tool have specific criteria and standards in place; ask teachers for specific types of documentation, such as letters of recommendation and samples of teacher and student work; and use a precise grading rubric or scale. The strength of the assessment portfolio is that the portfolio gives a broad view of learning across the school year. Its limitation, however, is the lack of teacher reflection and self-assessment (Wolf & Deitz, 1998).

Implementating Teacher Portfolios

A combination of these factors—limited administrator expertise, little shared understanding of what constitutes good teaching, low levels of trust between teach-

Figure 1

Rubric Category: Family Connections

Teachers work closely with families for the best interest of their students.

GOAL	Advanced	Proficient	Minimal Effort	Unsatisfactory
To communicate on a regular basis with parents regarding assessments.	Teacher communicates with parents on a monthly basis regarding test and homework scores on assessments.	Teacher communicates during the midpoint and during the end of the marking period with parents regarding student assessment scores and grades.	Teacher communicates with parents only through office-sent grading sheets and forms.	Teacher fails to communicate with parents regarding assessments.
To share knowledge of your classroom and the curriculum with parents.	Teacher provides the parents with a regular classroom newsletter, utilizes the student journal notebooks to correspond with parents, and makes parents aware of the curriculum of the class.	Teacher utilizes the classroom newsletter and take-home folder.	Teacher is inconsistent with the classroom newsletter and take-home folder.	Evidence of a classroom newsletter and take-home folder is missing.

The standards for parent communication are apparent in this summative portfolio rubric: The use of classroom newsletters, take-home folders, and specified types of communication are important. The formative portfolio would use similar standards but would be assessed in a completely different manner.

> ers and administrators—lead to a culture of passivity and protection. (Danielson & McGreal, 2000, p. 6)

This quote by Danielson and McGreal identifies many of the reasons teacher portfolios are valuable assessment instruments. Teacher portfolios can help to end the "culture of passivity and protection" by forming a shared vision of what good teaching looks like and creating a culture in which administrators and teachers are partners in education. Nevertheless, although teacher portfolios may seem like the solution to teacher assessment, many questions surround their use and implementation.

How will administrators find the time to read through all of the portfolios? Many administrators already struggle to find time to complete the currently required formal teacher evaluations. A goal of a teacher portfolio evaluation system is to establish professional communication and collaboration between administrators and teachers, therefore during a portfolio conference, the teacher and the administrator should discuss teaching pedagogy. But even if teachers and administrators consider the portfolio system as a vehicle for collegiality, the time factor is a legitimate concern.

Teachers are responsible for collecting and organizing their portfolios before a teacher and an administrator sit down to talk about the contents of a portfolio. Further, administrators should not attempt to single-handedly review portfolios; doing so would not change the process of teacher evaluations.

Districts that schedule portfolio conferences throughout the year spend less time during individual teacher conferences. For example, administrators and teachers could meet to discuss portfolios at the end of each grading period or the end of each semester. Meeting periodically throughout the year shortens the length of individual conferences; gives administrators the opportunity to monitor teachers throughout the year; and enables teachers to use their administrators' advice to revise and improve their goals and to collect documentation for their next conference. These conferences can be held before and after school, during a teacher's duty, or during an inservice day.

Can you use teacher portfolios and still complete formal observations of teachers? Many administrators are concerned about giving up formal classroom observations. Generally, the purpose of classroom observation is to improve instruction, whereas the purpose of evaluation is to render a decision about continued employment. Observa-

tions become part of evaluation when teachers show unsatisfactory performance over time. Therefore, implementing teacher portfolios does not necessarily mean that principals cannot or should not continue to conduct formal observations. By using teacher portfolios as well as formal classroom observations, administrators will have the opportunity to observe their teachers in various contexts throughout the school year without being in the classroom on a daily basis.

Districts that choose to carry out both formal observations and portfolio evaluations can merge the two: A formal observation and any recommendations that follow can become part of a teacher's portfolio. For example, when an administrator conducts a formal classroom observation, it may involve a pre- and postconference with the teacher and a written report with recommendations and commendations. The teacher can use and improve on any recommendations made by the administrator and document this in the portfolio. Both the formal classroom observation and the teacher portfolio assessment should be a seamless match.

How long will it take to implement teacher portfolios into a school? Implementing a teacher portfolio evaluation system will take time. First, districts must decide what type of portfolio they want to use: summative, formative, learning, assessment, or a combination. The purpose of the portfolio will guide how the system is implemented. Then, a group of teachers and administrators can create evaluation rubrics, rating scales, and assessment criteria. For example, if a district chooses to implement a summative portfolio system, what specific standards should be assessed with the teacher portfolio (Danielson & McGreal, 2000)? This process may take up to a year because it requires a great amount of discussion and thought. Finally, districts need to pilot the teacher portfolio before implementing it full-scale. A pilot should last at least half of the school year. The pilot group should be a representative sample of the entire staff, and the participants should be volunteers. The pilot group will help administrators refine the portfolio standards, the rubrics, and the rating scales.

When it comes time to introduce the teacher portfolio evaluation system to the district staff, members of the pilot group become invaluable. They can help lead groups of teachers through the process one step at a time and be available to answer questions and alleviate concerns. Their portfolios can be tangible examples of what a portfolio may look like, the types of documents that might be included, and the reflections they made during the implementation process. Finally, the pilot group is an important part of helping the administrators. Pilot teachers can share with other teachers how using portfolios improves student learning, teacher growth, and teacher-administrator relationships. The time spent on successfully implementing a portfolio system will be well worth it if teacher quality and school relationships improve.

Conclusion

> Evaluation is an ongoing set of experiences in which teachers examine their own and each other's work, determine its effectiveness, and explore alternative strategies. In fact, a professional structure for teaching may not include traditional, bureaucratic supervision, defined as the one-to-one relationship between a worker and a presumably more expert superordinate who is charged with overseeing and correcting the work. (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1992, p. 8)

Many educators will agree with Darling-Hammond and Sclan that teachers need to take ownership of their work, that in evaluations supervisors become advisers who facilitate and offer advice instead of a rating. Evaluation systems of the past, however, have failed to achieve any semblance of this ideal. They are outdated, do not encourage professional communication, and rely on the documentation of a few observable behaviors and a single-rating scale that has little to do with student learning or professional growth (Danielson & McGreal, 2000). Like Sisyphus, condemned to incessantly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, the teachers and administrators who use these outdated systems are destined to a futile existence of meaningless teacher evaluation.

Consequently, teacher portfolios can change assessment to provide educators with opportunities to be placed in active, professional roles that allow for reflection and growth while giving districts the feedback they need to gauge student learning and achievement. Although portfolios offer no panacea to all that ails teacher evaluation, they can give educators and school districts a way to focus attention on what is most important in education: student and teacher growth. **PL**

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Resources

Books

❑ Bird, T. (1990). The schoolteacher's portfolio: An essay on possibilities. In J. Millman & L. Darling-Hammond (Eds.), *The new handbook of teacher evaluation: Assessing elementary and secondary teachers* (pp. 241–256). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

❑ Lyons, N. (Ed.). (1998). *With portfolio in hand: Validating the new teacher professionalism.* Boston: Teachers College Press.

Websites

❑ **www.mediaworkshop.org/ourwork/projects/k_8teacher_portfolios.html** Samples of teacher portfolios in a PowerPoint format.

❑ **www2.ncsu.edu/unity/lockers/project/portfolios/portfoliointro.html** Examples of preservice and National Board of Certified Teachers' portfolios.

❑ **www.tts.uwosh.edu/career/portfolio.html** A generic list of items that may appear in a portfolio.

❑ **www.nbpts.org** The home page for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

❑ **www.westga.edu/~jdbutler/Related_links/DevelopingTeacherPortfolios.ppt** A PowerPoint presentation about the definition, use, and guidelines of portfolios.

Audiotapes

❑ Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (Producer). (1999). *Portfolios: A guide for students and teachers* (Cassette Recording). Alexandria, VA: Author.

❑ Forster, E., Lopez-Diaz, G., & Macula, A. (Speakers). (1999). *Professional portfolios: Reflective and performance assessment tools* (Cassette Recording). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Videotapes

❑ Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (1989). *The supervision series: Another set of eyes,* parts 1 & 2 [Video Series]. (Available from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1703 N. Beauregard St., Alexandria, VA 22311)