

Creating a School Portfolio

In the field of education, portfolios are collections of artifacts or work that document and demonstrate growth over time of a student, teacher, or, in this case, a school community, providing a comprehensive view of a school.

A school portfolio may take many forms, but most commonly it is a folder or binder that allows for continual addition of data that demonstrates development in specific areas (e.g., focus areas). This type of portfolio presents more than just end products (e.g., policies, practices, student outcomes, etc.), but may also include the stages of development of a practice, policy, or level of student achievement, documenting concretely what was done to identify, determine, or select a course of action.

How School Portfolios Are Used

The data, conclusions, and implications for action assembled by the SIT in the form of a school portfolio are useful to the school in many aspects of the school-improvement process.

Analyzing the Work of the School

The use of portfolios in the field of fine arts and design is perhaps the one that most closely mirrors how portfolios are used in education.

Artists use portfolios to reflect on their own growth and development. Members of the school community may also use a portfolio to reflect on the work of the school. Through an examination of its contents (prior to, during, or after the portfolio's creation) faculty and staff can use the school portfolio to:

- make sense of what is happening at the school

- develop a better understanding of a particular problem
- inform decisions about how to address a particular problem or set of circumstances, or
- enhance the personal fulfillment of the school community in recognition of things they've been able to accomplish.

Through any of these four uses of a school portfolio, a school may gain a better understanding of itself in order to directly improve student achievement.

Gaining External Approval or Recognition

Artists and photographers use portfolios for both personal and public purposes. In addition to being a tool for self-reflection and growth, a portfolio is a tool for the artist to gain employment or to place work in a gallery. Under these conditions, an artist places his or her best work in the portfolio.

A school's portfolio may be used to develop external relationships or enhance a school's status or reputation. As part of an external review, an external audience draws conclusions about the quality of a school's

WHEN SHOULD YOU CREATE THE PORTFOLIO?

Some schools choose to develop the school portfolio as part of their self-study, while some create it at the conclusion of the self-study.

We don't promote or discourage either practice, but recommend that you ask which portfolio development process will best facilitate your school's self-study. Will the *creation* of the portfolio detract from the *analysis* of the data/artifacts within the portfolio or will it facilitate the analysis? Choose whatever process you think will best fuel your self-study and best use faculty and staff's time.

practice. The portfolio is a rich source of information that is used by external reviewers to familiarize themselves with the school and its core operations and achievements.

To effectively communicate what is happening at a school, it is often necessary to present aspects of school through written documents or photographs. Some artists complain about the presentation of their work in two-dimensional representations, asserting that you can't get a feeling for a piece of art by viewing a slide. This is a source of tension for a school portfolio as well. By coupling the review of a portfolio with a multiple-day visit to a school, this problem can be partially alleviated.

Informing Continuous Improvement

In addition to tools for internal reflection and external review, school portfolios may also act as a data source to inform continu-

ous improvement. The keys to a portfolio becoming a tool for continuous improvement are:

- establishing a culture of inquiry in data-informed decision making – a routine of feeding data back to individuals that can best act on the information to make changes in student achievement;
- developing school personnel's skills to be able to analyze and act upon information, data;
- gathering the most relevant and informative information available to illuminate how you're doing, what you're doing, and what you can do next to improve or sustain achievement.

The creation of these three key elements within a school can build habits that make a school portfolio a living document, as opposed to a static collection of artifacts for external display. Its success is based on your inquiry, your essential question(s), and how closely your portfolio contains or summarizes information that will help you develop an informed response to your question(s).

Selecting Portfolio Content

The development of an artist's portfolio is not a haphazard or random act, but involves difficult choices about what goes in it. In fact, one artist said, "The hardest part of creating a portfolio is the editing process, choosing what doesn't go in it." The same can be said of creating a school portfolio. The selection of the most appropriate and most informative *artifacts* is a challenging task in creating a school portfolio. Artifacts can take several forms, including

- surveys
- school records
- teacher assignments
- a video
- newspaper articles
- pictures

DO YOU NEED A SCHOOL PORTFOLIO AS PART OF AN EXTERNAL REVIEW?

In preparation for an external review that includes a self-study component, reviewers frequently require that the self-study be documented and presented to the external audience. In fact, the documentation of the self-study is the starting place for many external reviews. In light of this, either during or at the conclusion of the self-study, the school may have to take on the task of documenting its self-study conclusions and data. The documentation method chosen by many schools as well as requested by several districts and states is the preparation of a school portfolio.

Not all external reviews require that a school portfolio be created. Some entities require that only a summary of conclusions and supporting data be prepared. Determine if preparing a school portfolio is appropriate based on your requirements and the resources (e.g., time, energy, etc.) it would require to compose one.

When selecting artifacts, there are several things to keep in mind.

The Focus Areas Chosen in the Self-Study

The artifacts chosen for the portfolio should relate to the focus areas chosen at the beginning of the self-study process. For instance, if we look at the focus areas used by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Secondary Schools to accredit high schools in New England, we see seven focus areas which they call “standards” for accreditation:

- Mission and Expectations for Student Learning
- Curriculum
- Instruction
- Assessment of Student Learning
- Leadership and Organization
- School Resources for Learning
- Community Resources for Learning

A school portfolio being created as part of an accreditation review would present artifacts that serve as evidence of best practices or resources available within each focus area chosen by the school in its self-study process. Such artifacts may include:

- a mission statement – the school’s foundation of high, equitably administered standards for student performance;
- a curriculum that is both accessible to students and aligned with state or district standards;
- instructional methods that are effective when used with students of various learning styles, backgrounds, and skills;
- assessments which provide accurate information about what students know and can do;
- evidence of leadership that makes strategic decisions which are focused on higher student achievement;
- evidence of family and community involvement built on the assets they each

possess and can offer to support the school’s mission and goals.

The Need for Multiple Types of Data

Specific artifacts should include technical and cognitive data as well as more traditional forms of data to inform external and internal audiences. These artifacts should be drawn from the same pieces of data that were used to reach conclusions in your self-study. Examples of such items are:

- survey results
- interview results
- classroom observation notes regarding instructional practice and student responses
- enrollment records
- attendance records
- transcripts
- standardized-test scores
- guidance records
- personnel evaluations
- staff development activities
- college entrance exam scores
- postsecondary enrollment records
- agendas of meetings focused on student achievement
- student work
- budgets annotated to indicate ongoing and new investments in student learning
- book and computer inventory

A Strategy for the Selection of Artifacts

Above is an abbreviated list of various artifacts that could be placed in a portfolio. To optimize the effectiveness of the portfolio you cannot include every piece of data that exists in the school. Pick pieces that are the most informative and most relevant.

Pulling the Portfolio Together

Many school portfolios begin with a cover letter introducing readers to the school portfolio and the process by which it has been put together. A description of the focus areas follows the cover letter. Within each focus area a number of things may be included:

- the essential question(s) within that focus area that the inquiry was centered around;
- samples of the data collected;
- a brief written reflective piece;
- conclusions reached in the focus area by the school community based on an analysis of the data.

Who Prepares the School Portfolio?

The School Improvement Team gathers evidence from the life of the school to address the focus areas. The SIT may incorporate evidence in multiple formats, including written documents (of standard size), charts, posters, photographs, models, audio- and videotapes, and computer-formatted data.

The reflective pieces included in some portfolios comment on why these pieces of evidence have been selected (in some cases developed) and how they demonstrate the school's goals, practices, results and development. It is the role of the SIT to either write or delegate the writing of these reflective pieces along with the writing of conclusions in each focus area.

Confidentiality and Security

As the school portfolio is being developed, the SIT should be mindful of confidentiality about student information. Every effort should be made to protect individual students' privacy by removing names from samples of student work and avoiding samples that may be easily identifiable. If students are featured in videotape, written permission should be obtained from the student

and his or her parent/guardian. If a family or community member's writing or speech is included, their consent should be obtained also.

Similar efforts should be made to maintain confidentiality about individual school personnel by removing staff, faculty, and administrator names (when appropriate) from reports, memorandums, teacher assignments, etc., and by avoiding materials that will easily identify their authors.

Format

The school portfolio may take many forms and include multiple media. However, it is important that the portfolio be organized and accessible to readers from outside (and inside) the school community. If the school uses a nonprint format for the school portfolio, SIT members should make a reproducible "guide" with key documents and a summary of the overall portfolio available for review before the visit.

In some cases, schools choose to include a cover letter that comments on the process through which the portfolio was developed. They may also consider including in the cover letter comments on how pieces of evidence demonstrate strengths, highlight "challenge areas," or raise questions for the school community.⁵

⁵ Some of the most powerful reflection is collaborative, when teachers and other members of the school community look together at the data and written reflections collected in the portfolio. There may be multiple occasions for collaborative reflection, for example: as teachers (and others) select pieces for the portfolio; in discussions of how individual pieces demonstrate the school's goals, practices or results; or in structured, facilitated conversations that support teachers (and others) in exploring the evidence at a deeper level.