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ABSTRACT

Noting that portfolios contain the students' best efforts at writing and mathematics problem-solving skills, this pamphlet discusses issues surrounding Vermont's portfolio assessment program from the parent's point of view. The pamphlet discusses reasons to use portfolios, how portfolios differ from traditional ways of looking at students' writing and math skills, what goes into a portfolio, how portfolios are evaluated, how the results of portfolio assessment are used by various entities, special needs students, and what parents and family members can do to help. (RS)

Portfolios and Your Child

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What is a portfolio?

It's a collection of a student's work, one that holds schoolwork specially chosen to show what the student can do.

Usually a portfolio is different from a work folder, which might hold *all* of a student's current pieces or projects. The portfolio contains the student's *best efforts* — and it gives the student a chance to reflect on the quality and development of his/her work. Vermont schools use portfolios to help develop students' writing and their problem-solving skills in mathematics.

Why use portfolios?

There are a number of good reasons. Here are a few:

- Portfolios allow us to look at several examples of student work — at a *range* of writing or problem-solving skills.
- Because the drafts of students' work are usually included, portfolios let us see how final products were developed.
- Portfolios give students, teachers, and parents a way to look at how well a student's work compares with established standards for good writing or mathematics.
- They also give us a way to look at students' growth and development over time.
- At the 4th and 8th grade levels, Vermont students' portfolios are evaluated as part of the statewide student assessment program — to see how well students meet the standards of good writing and mathematics.

Standards are the goals we set for high-level student performance. Our Vermont standards make it clear, across the state, what the critical building blocks of good writing and problem-solving are.

The purpose of the state's assessment program is *not* to rank or sort individual students. It is to find out how well our students write and solve problems, and to help them improve their skills.

How do portfolios differ from traditional ways of looking at students' writing and math skills?

- Unlike a simple report-card grade of A-, C, or S+, portfolios give us a way to see *actual student performance*, and to evaluate how much the student's projects show the features of good writing and mathematics.

- Unlike single tests, portfolios show real writing and problem-solving, using students' daily work — and they allow the students to choose, with teacher guidance, what goes into the portfolio.

- Unlike a simple folder of student work, portfolios help us compare student work to *standards* that are clear and are shared with students, parents, and others.

What goes into a portfolio?

In ***writing,*** required pieces for a portfolio that will be assessed include:

- an imaginative piece: a poem, short story, or play.
- a personal response — perhaps to a book, current event, sports event, or personal experience.
- writing from a subject other than language arts (in 4th grade, one piece of writing; in 8th grade, three pieces).
- a "best piece" of writing, selected by the student, sometimes with help from the teacher.
- a letter, by the student, about the best piece or portfolio.
- a table of contents.

In ***mathematics,*** the portfolio should include:

- seven "best pieces" that show good problem-solving, and show students' best work in each of the criteria. (Good problems can usually

be solved in more than one way, and might have more than one right answer.)
- 10 to 15 other pieces.
- A letter to the evaluator.

Who chooses what goes in?

The student decides, with the teacher's help, what goes into the portfolio. Often the contents of the portfolio change as the year goes on, and as students develop better and better work.

How is a portfolio evaluated?

Writing portfolios are evaluated in five ways:

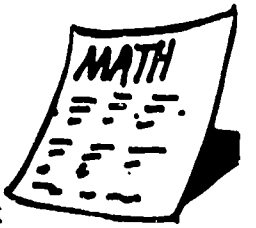
1) Is the *purpose* of the writing clear?
2) How *well organized* is the writing?
3) Do the *details* help the writing?
4) Does the writing have *"voice"* or appropriate tone?
5) Does the writing show acceptable *grammar, usage, and mechanics*?

Each of these questions is answered with one of the following responses:

- "extensively"
- "frequently"
- "sometimes"
- "rarely"

So, for example, a piece of writing might be assessed as having "frequently" used rich details, but only "rarely" showing acceptable grammar, usage, and mechanics.

Mathematics portfolios are evaluated by looking at students' pieces for evidence of two types of skills: problem-solving and communication.



Problem-solving skills:

1) How well does the student *understand* the task?
2) What *strategy* does the student use to solve the problem?
3) What *kinds of decisions* does the student make?
4) Is the student able to *extend the solution*? (That is, can the student make observations about the solution, make connections to the real problem, and develop a rule or formula for similar problems?)

Math communication skills:

1) How well does the student use *math language* — vocabulary, symbols, and notation?
2) Does the student use *graphs, tables, charts, diagrams, or models?*
3) How *clearly* does the student present his/her work?

Each question is answered with one of the following ratings:

Level 4: Work shows "sophistication"
Level 3: Work shows "proficiency"
Level 2: "Novice or beginner" work
Level 1: Little or no evidence to meet the criterion was found

How are the results of portfolio assessment used?

- ***Students*** use portfolio results to focus their efforts on areas that need improvement. Usually, students' work shows strength in some areas and needs in others. In most classes, students continually use the program's standards to look at and improve their own work.

In writing, for example, a student may review a piece with a friend, compare it to sample "benchmark" pieces, and find that his own work is well-organized but lacks detail. The student may then revise the writing to add rich, well-chosen details.

In math, a student may compare her work with a benchmark example and see that she needs to make better use of math language. She then has some insight, and a useful model, to help her improve her work in this way.

- ***Teachers*** use portfolio results to help them fit their instruction to their students' needs. Teachers periodically assess student work to help them adjust what and how they are teaching — often for individual students, but sometimes for the class or writing/math program as a whole. Finally, toward the end of the year, teachers review and score students' whole portfolios.

Teachers often use portfolio information as part of what they report to parents at conference or report-card time. Portfolio results do not

translate directly into grades, but they help to communicate student progress.

Portfolios are usually passed on from year to year, building into a collection that reflects a student's whole academic career. (In most cases, only some of the pieces are passed along; the rest go home.) This information is helpful to the student's next teacher, and often the student will continue to work on a project from the previous year.

- ***Administrators and school board members*** use portfolio results to help build a "big picture" of how well students are learning. They use the information to celebrate the strong areas of the school or district, and to identify needs for additional resources or staff development.

- ***The state of Vermont*** uses portfolio results to provide some of the data for a statewide picture of how well Vermont students write and solve problems in mathematics. Also, several students' portfolios are randomly selected from each school or district for review by a statewide group of teachers — to help identify areas of strength and areas that need assistance.

- ***Parents*** can use portfolio results to see how their children's learning and skills grow over time, to see the range of youngsters' writing and math work, and to see how much the work shows the features of good writing and mathematics.

How can I know if my child is progressing?

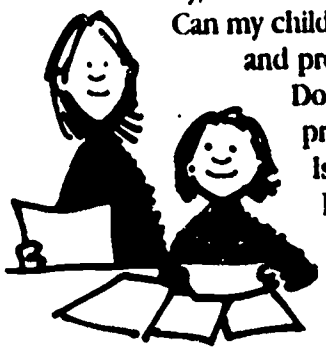
There are several ways to think about student progress in writing and mathematics:

- First of all, look for *growth over time.* Try to save samples of student work from year to year — and even within a year, from September to January to May. Be sure to talk about what you see!

- Ask the teacher what kinds of *goals* he/she has set for (and with) your youngster. Ask how you can observe progress toward those goals.

- You might also want to take a look at some of the *sample* or *benchmark pieces*, which illustrate the range of student work at different grade levels. You might ask about these at a parent conference.

- Finally, consider some basic questions:



Can my child talk more now about what makes good writing and problem-solving?

Does he/she seem to enjoy writing and problem-solving?

Is my youngster writing more often? Writing *more*?

Is he/she solving problems with different approaches, and using more math language?

Is he/she proud of what is written, and of the problems he/she has solved?

What if my child has special needs? Shouldn't he/she have a portfolio too?

Absolutely. Everyone who can communicate in some way or other should have a portfolio.

Some students with special needs who have an IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) may have some accommodations specified for their particular disability or condition. For example, some students may need computers with large print or special assistance in organizing their work. But *everyone* can develop writing and problem-solving skills, and can benefit from clear standards and frequent writing/problem-solving experiences. Special needs students usually respond very well when they are presented with the same opportunities and clear expectations as their classmates.

What can parents and family members do to help?

- *Show interest* in the student's writing and problem-solving. Ask what kinds of things are going into the portfolio, and what the student thinks he/she does best as a writer or problem-solver.

- *When you visit* school, ask to see the student's portfolio. If possible, have the student explain to you what's in it, and why.

- *When you talk to the teacher* — by phone, in parent conferences, or just visiting — talk about students' writing and math. What do you notice about the writing or problem-solving? What does the teacher notice?

- *When you read aloud* — from the newspaper, a magazine or a book — sometimes stop to comment on what you notice about the author's style or strategies.

- *When you use mathematics* to solve problems, or see someone else thinking through a problem (for example, estimating the cost of a trip or the length of time it will take to get there), comment on what strategies were used. (Charting? Drawing a picture?) *Talk* about how the problem was solved, and what you think about the answer.

- Try to *increase the amount of out-of-school writing and mathematics* that students do — not by adding homework, but by using writing and problem-solving on an everyday basis.

Here are some possibilities:

Writing: Lists, reminder notes to family members, poems, letters, awards, letters to the editor, complaints, journals, etc.!

Mathematics: Charts, puzzles, doubling or reducing recipes, estimating costs, distances, time, space, materials, etc.!

"Modeling" writing and problem-solving yourself really helps. *You don't need to be an expert or a teacher.* Just write, solve problems, and notice your youngster's progress. Those are among the most important things you can do.

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