Presenting Themselves with Power and Passion

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From the CES Common Principles:

Students should have opportunities to exhibit their expertise before family and community. The diploma should be awarded upon a successful final demonstration of mastery for graduation—an "Exhibition."

The school should honor diversity and build on the strength of its communities, deliberately and explicitly challenging all forms of inequity.

An "Exhibition" is a demonstration of mastery on many levels. When students prepare and present portfolios of their own work to a public audience, they are demonstrating mastery of more than the traditional academic skills. The process that culminates in the exhibition teaches students to present themselves articulately and powerfully and to work independently to a high standard.

These skills can provide access to the stratum of our society inhabited by those who have the social and financial means to live in comfort. Children who are raised in families of privilege have the positioning and opportunities to acquire these abilities, but for others, they are too often acquired only by chance. People who know how to work and present themselves well are likely to be accepted—into a good college, a well-paying job, an important conversation. These skills, then, are at least equally important to what are more usually thought of as school skills such as reading, writing, and computation. Thus schools that teach children to be articulate and self-motivated are "deliberately and explicitly challenging all forms of inequity."

Exhibitions are a product of a lengthy process on the part of both teacher and student. When students are asked to create a body of work for a portfolio that demonstrates their intellectual ability and work habits, they learn the patience and tenacity required to produce excellent work. Because students must create and revise enough portfolio pieces to meet the standard, they are coached by teachers to learn to work efficiently. Teachers help them learn how to work to high standards, and how to recognize when a high standard has been reached. They learn what they are capable of, what it means to do their very best. They learn what it means to work hard, to revise until they are satisfied. As they practice, these skills become habits.

When students are asked to present this evidence to a public audience, again and again, they learn something at least equally important: the ability to present themselves to others with power and passion.

Different Settings, Similar Results

For the past ten years, I have been involved with schools in which students must present work as a demonstration that they are ready to move on. At the Mission Hill School, a public school for kindergarteners through eighth graders in Boston, I helped to plan and put into place the requirements and procedures for portfolio presentations, taught students how to prepare and show their work, and sat on judging committees. In 2006, I become the director of the Theodore R. Sizer Teachers Center at the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, Massachusetts, which serves seventh through twelfth graders, another school with an innovative portfolio assessment system. There are a growing number of schools in the country using public demonstrations of readiness to move on, but I believe these two are among the few in which students are expected to present their work publicly not once but several times, in several different domains.

Though the settings and demographics of Mission Hill and Parker are very different, graduates from both schools tend to be similar kinds of students: articulate, independent, and poised young people. These students appear self-confident in public arenas. They are comfortable in their bodies, they use words easily,

and they are unafraid. Both Parker and Mission Hill value students and expect a lot from them both academically and personally; students are given more power and voice than in most schools.

It is possible that these students would present themselves well regardless of their school assessment requirements. But I don't think so. I am convinced that much of the self-possession of the students stems from the demands of the public portfolio presentation. The expectation that students will stand in front of a group of adults to present convincing evidence that they are ready to move on in the form of their own work and words forces them to learn to present themselves well. Because this requirement is repeated several times, their ability to do this grows.

Of course, the exhibition processes at Mission Hill and Parker are not perfect. There are always questions about these kinds of assessment processes, as there are and should be about anything we ask of our students. One major question, particularly at Mission Hill, which serves younger students, is around timing and level of difficulty. Exhibitions are still uncharted territory; there are neither written standards nor scope and sequence. Given that most students do not come from early school environments where independence and presentation skills are valued, how do we decide what expectations are age-appropriate? When is the right time for kids to be asked to present—and at what level of difficulty? At what age should children be asked to be self-motivated learners? How do we provide scaffolding? How important is it to push children beyond their comfort levels—and how far? When are we asking too much and when are we not asking enough?

And both schools struggle with the reality of creating standards for a group of individuals. How do we decide what to ask of special education students? What do we do when students do not reach the standard year after year, when research and common sense tell us that holding them indefinitely in eighth or tenth grade will not be helpful to them in the future? How do we assess mastery of skills of presentation and work habits? What does mastery look like, and does it look the same for all students?

These questions and many others continue to be asked in both schools. But here I am going to focus not on the questions, but on what I believe to be already a success in both schools, a success that is still too rarely mentioned when the benefits of exhibitions are touted.

Exhibitions as Rites of Passage

Something wondrous happens as students move through a multiyear public performance assessment process. At the end of the eighth grade year at Mission Hill, students have presented in at least three hour-long sessions covering six domains. At the end of the senior year at Parker, students have presented at least six times. These students emanate a presence when they are in a public arena talking with visitors, presenting on panels, visiting high schools, running assemblies, etc. This poise develops in students for whom we might otherwise not expect it: students who struggle in class, students who in their everyday lives answer questions with monosyllabic grunts, students with hefty IEPs, students for whom standard English is not a first language. They don't become different people. Rather, they learn to project the person they are with ease, confidence, and grace—and often with humor and remarkable insight about themselves.

Because I see these qualities at varied age levels in these two schools, I am convinced of the link to the demands that the schools' assessment systems make on them as they proceed through each school. The students at Mission Hill are in eighth grade when they graduate, and the students at Parker are in twelfth grade. At Parker, a student's first presentation, or Gateway, usually takes place at the end of what would at Mission Hill be the eighth grade year. Parker and Mission Hill students—of all ages—are treated with deep respect, given similar amounts of personal attention and are held to similar daily expectations. And Parker Division One students (seventh and eighth graders) are wonderful: generally polite, earnest and happy in school. But that extra thing, the presence, the development of a public persona that one sees in Mission Hill eighth graders and Parker twelfth graders, is not evident, because those Parker students have not yet had enough time. It is true that some self-confidence and maturity comes with being a member of the most senior class, but students in these two schools seem to have something more. I have seen these same qualities in children of varying ages who are expected to present themselves publicly, using their own words to speak and defend their thoughts: Jehovah's Witnesses, Bat and Bar Mitzvah students, members of debating clubs etc. And I hear similar stories from other schools that ask their students to present their work publicly.

Articulate Self-confidence

When I began to work with students at Parker, asking them to talk with visitors, present in panels, and give tours, I asked teachers to give me names of students—not the best, most articulate students, but anyone who they thought might like or benefit from the work for whatever reason. I have learned that it is often the students from whom we expect the least that are the most impressive to visitors, for it is possible to see simultaneously both the struggles and great strengths of these children. And always, no matter who the students are, the hour spent with them has been what most stays with visitors.

The feedback from visitors to both schools is consistent, and the same words come up again and again: particularly "powerful" and "articulate." Parker visitors say things like, "The ability of students to speak with great articulation about their learning, their work, themselves and the school was VERY powerful," and "How well the students carry themselves and how articulate they are!!"

Mission Hill visitors echo these comments: "Your student tour guides were STUPENDOUS!" "All of the students presented themselves so very well." Imagine these same young people in job or college admittance interviews. The value of good self-presentation skills cannot be underestimated.

The anecdotal evidence of the continuing success of these students to voice their thoughts also serves to bolster my belief in the power of the exhibition. Though neither school yet has hard data, the feedback from high schools attended by Mission Hill students and colleges enrolling Parker students is consistent. Again and again, educators at receiving schools mention voice and self-awareness when speaking of these students.

Independent Learning

Students at Mission Hill and Parker must demonstrate the ability to be independent learners. Because the expectation at both schools is that students will continually create, revise and collect work for the portfolio, students have much more practice in organizing and managing their time and work than students in more traditional schools, who tend to be given an in-class assignment due that period or a homework assignment due the next day. At both Mission Hill and Parker, many students choose to use their free time to work on portfolios, alone or with a teacher. Students come to school early and leave late. They opt to work.

Students at both schools know what the portfolio expectations are and know they have a long time to prepare; they also know they must work hard and manage their time well or they will not be ready. Of course, there are students who take longer than others, those at Parker who do not Gateway after the usual two-year period, or, at Mission Hill, those who are not prepared to present or are asked to re-present. And, of course, there are questions and problems, as there are with any process designed for large groups of people. Individual human beings can manage to circumvent the best intentions and designs. But in schools that assess through portfolios and exhibition of mastery, all students at least have the option of learning the life skills and habits that these assessments demand, and all improve as a result to some extent.

Portfolio assessment and exhibitions are vehicles for teaching all of our students to be powerful people, to know themselves as learners, to work to their own high standards, to interview easily and well, and to hold their own in intellectual and social arenas. We speak often of equity and access; surely, the skills demanded by the process of creating, revising, editing, and finally presenting one's own work would help our most vulnerable children to have power in the world. There are many highly esteemed reasons to use portfolios of work and performance assessments in schools. Equity of opportunity should be added to the list.

Mission Hill School Habits of Mind

Viewpoint: Taking different viewpoints, perspectives. How might someone else see this?

Evidence: Seeking and weighing evidence. Is it convincing? Credible?

Connections: Looking for patterns and connections. Have I seen this before?

Supposition: Hypothesizing, asking "what if" questions. Could it have been different?

Relevance: Looking for relevance, asking "so what" questions. Does it matter and how?

Reflections from Mission Hill Graduate Ayanna Michel-Lord

I think doing portfolios was really helpful—especially at Mission Hill because I was still so young. I didn't like talking in groups when I was little. I didn't ever talk in class. At Mission Hill, starting in kindergarten, you have to present at assemblies—that helped prepare me. Presenting is really nerve-wracking. The worst part is that you are by yourself and you have to talk for a half an hour or more just by yourself. You worry about how to make it last. I went to [another student's] first, so I knew what to do. I got a chance to see how it was done. That made it a little easier.

Once you do a portfolio presentation and are successful, you feel like you can go places and you have nothing to worry about. It grows your self-confidence. I had a summer job interview and it was easy—I knew how to present myself. It's like basketball. You go to practice and you learn how to play the game. If you didn't have practice and just went out on the court, you wouldn't know what to do.

After I presented, I got asked to go to Fall Forum and present, and then I got even better. Portfolios opened opportunities for me. I've had great experiences because of it.

Ayanna Michel-Lord is currently a tenth grader at Fenway High School in Boston.

Parker Charter Criteria of Excellence

Parker has rigorous performance standards in:

Reading
Writing
Listening
Oral Presentation
Research
Artistic Expression
Scientific investigation
Mathematical Problem-Solving and Communication
Systems Thinking
Technology
Wellness
Spanish

Parker Charter Habits of Learning

These are the habits that the Parker community expects its students to develop and exhibit in their academic work and in daily life.

Inquiry
Expression
Critical Thinking
Collaboration
Organization
Attentiveness
Involvement
Reflection

Reflection from Parker Senior Evan Hayward

I remember my first class presentations. I was shaking the entire time. When I had to lift up my hand to point to something, it was shaking really hard. It was really embarrassing. And my voice changed—you know how your voice changes when you are really nervous? But I learned how to do it. A lot of kids stay after to work with the teachers to practice, but I worked on it myself. I started to develop internal ways to deal with it. I knew how to pysch up for it. I trained myself to be calm. You get better and better; it gets easier

psychologically. Each year, you stress about less and less and you know how to use your tricks and practice. You think “I’ve done this before, it’s going to be okay.”

Parker kids become so comfortable with themselves. They have lots of confidence.

Every time alumni come back, they say we have no idea how nervous most kids are when they have to present and how good at it Parker kids are. One kid said he and another Parker student were in a college class together and it was really easy to tell who was from Parker—they were the only two kids who talked. My college interviews were fine. But I think if I’d been in a school that didn’t do presentations I would have been shaking like I was at my first one.

A Gateway is like a job interview—this is who I am and this is what I do. We do a lot of class presentations that get us ready for the Gateways, and then the Gateways prepare us for the senior project presentation. If you asked most parents if they could get up in front of a group of their peers, they would be petrified. But we have to do it until we are comfortable with it. I know that just the act of getting up is going to make things much easier in life. I think you have to learn and practice how to be in front of people. If you don’t, it’s like being thrown into a pool after hearing about what swimming is. Someone has to teach you what to do or you will drown.

How Exhibitions Work at Mission Hill School and Parker Charter Essential School

The exhibition process differs at these two schools, reflecting the values and structures of each. At Mission Hill, students begin working on creating a portfolio when they enter sixth grade. As they move through the three year process, they are given more and more independent working time to prepare their portfolios. In spring of the seventh grade year, students present two portfolios, History and Beyond the Classroom (a portfolio honoring the strengths and interests of the child outside of the school environment). In the winter of the eighth grade year, students present two more portfolios: Literacy and Art. In spring of the eighth grade year, they present the final two portfolios: Math and Science. These are long presentations: each domain presentation, including questions, takes about an hour, followed by a half-hour of judging by committee members (using rubrics developed by the school). Students must have specific numbers and kinds of work for each domain. Each piece created in the year the student presents is assessed; students reflect verbally and in writing on work done in previous years as a barometer of how far they have come. Assessment is based on the standard of their work, presentation skills, habits of mind, and ability to self-reflect as a learner. Judging committees consist of the subject teacher, the advisor, one or more family members, a community member and two apprentice students from sixth and seventh grades, who act as helpers to the presenter as they learn how to do this themselves.

Parker does not have grade levels; instead students spend the approximately six years they are at Parker in Divisions, roughly comparable to what in another school would be seventh and eighth grades, ninth and tenth grades, and eleventh and twelfth grades. Students move, or “Gateway,” from Division to Division when they can demonstrate they are ready; though most take two years, some move in less than two years and some take longer. All students in Division One and again in Division Two have the same curriculum in four blocks: a two hour block of Arts and Humanities (AH), two hours for Math, Science and Technology (MST), and one hour each for Spanish and Wellness. Division Three students choose electives in hour-long blocks. Students demonstrate their readiness to move to the next Division by collecting a portfolio of work that shows they have met the expectations for skill levels of that Division. Each piece of work they do is held against the Parker “Criteria of Excellence” and students revise work until it is judged by themselves and their teachers to have met the standard of the Division. Again, students have a great deal of control over their own learning: the expectation is that they will revise their work for their portfolio until they and the teacher are satisfied—or they will choose to stop and move onto a new piece if they feel they are no longer learning from the revising they are doing. In order to move on, students at Parker create a finished portfolio for each domain in each division. They also present work to an audience of teachers, peers and family members in “Gateway” exhibitions in AH, MST and Spanish. The Division One Gateways are presentations of portfolios, Division Two students present six-week projects, and Division Three seniors present a Senior Project, one major project that they have worked on for the entire year.

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