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Uncommon Measures: Using Teacher Portfolios in Educator Evaluation

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Contents

In an effort to develop a balanced and valid system, states and districts increasingly have moved toward using multiple measures in educator evaluation. Certain measures, such as classroom observations and value-added models, are more commonly used or considered than others. To support innovation and build collective knowledge, this series provides guidance on alternative measures of teacher effectiveness and highlights district and state contexts where these methods are used.

This guidance document focuses on the use of teacher portfolios as an alternative measure, including background information on portfolios, information on their use in teacher evaluation systems, and recommendations, resources and references to support districts in their decision-making and implementation of this measure.

Background

The use of portfolios to demonstrate teacher development gained prominence in the 1980s specifically to support preservice teacher education (Goldberg, 2011). The positive impact on the professional growth of pre-service teachers is well-documented, particularly in the areas of lesson planning and modifications to instruction based on student work or assessments (Chung, 2008; Anderson & DeMeulle, 1998; Snyder, Lippincott, & Bower, 1998). The perceived value of portfolios for teacher-candidates led districts to begin to integrate them into school settings on a broader basis and in the 1990s, teacher portfolios emerged as a vehicle for assessing and rewarding K-12 teachers (Wolf & Dietz, 1998). By the early 2000s, many districts were using teacher portfolios for evaluation and professional development (McNelly, 2002) and various studies in that decade took steps toward validating their positive impact on teaching performance, reported learning and student achievement gains, particularly in the context of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards teacher portfolio process (Chung, 2008; Sato, Wei, & Darling-Hammond, 2008). While not without implementation challenges, particularly around inter-rater reliability (Johnson, McDaniel, & Willeke, 2000), various researchers have affirmed the benefits of providing a flexible format for the measurement of student growth, particularly in non-tested grades and subjects (Goe, Bell & Little, 2008; Wolf & Dietz, 1998; McNelly, 2002) and encouraging teacher self-reflection (McIntyre & Dangel, 2009; Painter, 2001; Wolf & Dietz, 1998).

Use of Portfolios in Teacher Evaluation Systems

Teacher portfolios can add a rich qualitative dimension to teacher evaluation that other measures cannot while acting as a strong tool for professional development. At least 13 states currently require or encourage the use of portfolios for measuring teacher performance (Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, 2015). A review of portfolios across districts and states finds that they are used to complement classroom observations and student performance measures for the following purposes:

- **As an alternative measure of student growth**. Portfolios acknowledge that student growth may be observed in other ways than improved test scores. Students might grow in their abilities to express their understanding through various mediums uniquely captured in portfolio format. Students might also need less support, over time, in demonstrating a given

competency level, a process that can be documented in portfolios (Goldberg, 2011). Portfolios can also present artifacts that demonstrate growth in creative tasks, critical thinking and problem-solving skills in richer ways than can be captured by other evaluation methods.

- **As a demonstration of teaching practices that are not captured through classroom observations or student performance measures.** Teaching frameworks such as those developed by Charlotte Danielson, Robert Marzano, and Robert C. Pianta contain elements that are not necessarily evident through classroom observation or student performance measures. Instructional practices such as lesson adjustment, monitoring of student learning and written feedback to students can be directly showcased with portfolios. Noninstructional priorities such as communication with families, collaboration with colleagues and professional growth activities can likewise be demonstrated through artifacts collected or prepared by the teacher.

Districts should carefully identify the intended purposes of portfolios before establishing the requirements of any portfolio system. Consider how portfolios might expand the scope of teaching standards measured by, or complement the evidence of practice captured by, the existing evaluation system (e.g., classroom observation, vendor assessments).

Benefits and Limitations Regarding the Use of Portfolios in Teacher Evaluation

If considering the use of teacher portfolios, districts should carefully weigh their benefits and limitations. The following are the most common trade-offs in teacher portfolio implementation:

- **Portfolios add a rich, qualitative dimension to teacher evaluation, but are resource-intense**. Portfolios generally reflect the *process* of teaching in a way that is not observable through classroom observation and student performance measures. Instead of the "snapshot" view of teacher performance offered by classroom observation or the narrow lens on teacher contribution offered by student performance measures, portfolios present a total picture of teacher performance from the beginning to end of the school year (McNelly, 2002). The process of compiling portfolios for teachers, however—from selecting student work samples to reflecting and writing about their teaching practice—can be "extraordinarily time-consuming" (Painter, 2001). The resulting portfolio contains many elements that likewise

> **Teacher entries and reflection pieces to consider for inclusion in portfolios**
>
> - Teaching philosophy
> - Student learning goals or other professional goals
> - Rationale for use of particular student assignment or assessment
> - Identification of students' strengths and weaknesses
> - Instructional strategies
> - Teachers' self-evaluation of student growth
> - Descriptions of verbal feedback provided to students
> - Descriptions of adjustments to instruction and differentiation based on student performance at beginning of instructional cycle
> - Interpretation of how student work over the instructional cycle reflects teacher contribution to growth
> - Teacher summary of factors external to classroom (e.g., domestic issues, extended student illnesses)

are time-consuming to review and the qualitative aspect of the portfolio might demand that multiple reviewers are used. Districts should not implement portfolios without considerable investments in evaluator capacity-building regarding using the district's scoring instrument (e.g., rubric). Having quality examples of portfolios for both teachers and evaluators to refer to can help to clarify the process (Painter, 2001).

- Portfolios can be used to measure growth in non-tested grades and subjects using work that already is happening in classrooms, but robust supports should be in place to ensure that evaluation of growth is consistent across students and teachers. For some courses, portfolios provide a format for evaluating growth that may be more appropriate than standardized assessments. Musical recordings, artwork, and videotaped performances or tasks are just some of the various formats that can be captured in electronic or traditional teacher portfolios. Scoring rubrics should evaluate both evidence of growth as demonstrated across student work samples collected at the beginning and the end of the instructional cycle and evidence of the *teacher's contribution* to student growth, as evidenced by artifacts such as lesson plans and written feedback to students, as well as teachers' personal reflections on instructional strategies. There are several challenges, however, to measuring growth accurately and fairly across teachers using portfolios. First, a high-quality rubric that is aligned to teaching standards must be developed to describe varying levels of quality in the student work and teaching practice. Portfolio evaluators should participate in calibration sessions to ensure a common understanding, particularly around how rubric performance-level descriptions should be interpreted. In addition, as is common practice with the evaluation of complex tasks, districts should consider having at least two evaluators review each portfolio to calibrate scores. Other policy questions arise as well, such as: If multiple student assignments are included in a portfolio, how do evaluators weight them for scoring purposes? How do evaluators account for the variations in rates of growth across different student ability groups?

> **Focus on Goals in Portfolios for Nazareth Area (Pennsylvania) School District**
>
> All teachers in Nazareth Area (Pennsylvania) School District are required to maintain professional portfolios that include evidence and self-reflection around four types of goals: district, building, teacher and learner. A formative check-in on midyear evidence is included in the process.
>
> Evidence and self-reflection must be included in the following areas, organized by goal level:
>
> District goals:
>
> - Ensuring a rigorous curriculum, aligned to standards, that incorporates technology
> - Ensuring the intellectual, emotional, physical and social needs of students
>
> Building goals:
>
> - Ensuring alignment of practice with the Danielson Framework
>
> Teacher goals:
>
> - Self-directed goal from options provided by supervising administrator, to include development of an action plan and description of how student growth will be affected
>
> Learner goals:
>
> - Solving a specific learning problem of particular student(s) or student groups, including pre- and postwork samples
>
> *(Nazareth Area School District, 2015)*

- Portfolios are strong vehicles for professional development through the reflective practices they encourage, but districts should be careful not to duplicate other professional growth

processes. Portfolios have been observed to be an "open-ended process that pushes [teachers] to revisit their own knowledge and express it in meaningful ways (Freidus, 1998). Specifically, portfolios usually encourage teachers to think and write about what academic standards to prioritize, how well student assignments or assessments align with these standards, goals for individual students, what quality of work is associated with low-, average- and high-performing students, what feedback to provide students and what instructional strategies to use. These benefits, however, are similar to those of other processes such as student learning objectives (SLOs) or the development of individualized educational plans. It is important that districts do not overburden teachers by replicating these processes in parallel systems. Districts therefore should consider whether the introduction of portfolios adds significant value to the professional development process or when implementing portfolios, carefully consider which grades and subjects to implement portfolios for and which teaching standards to address.

- Portfolios empower teachers to help determine how they are evaluated but districts should implement controls to ensure that evidence is representative of the full range of their work.

Portfolios empower teachers in two ways: first they usually incorporate some form of self-evaluation, including self-scoring of student growth and self-reflection and second, they generally give the teacher some choice in which types of artifacts to compile, including which student assignments to draw upon, and which specific students' work to include, since it is not usually practicable to include all students' work. This is a remarkable contrast to classroom observation protocols which define evidence of practice in stricter terms. Districts should implement rules to ensure that selected artifacts are truly representative of teachers' experience. For example, in some districts, teachers are asked to include student work samples from low-, average- and high-achieving students. In other districts, teachers are asked to select which students' samples will be included *prior* to the teachers reviewing the students' completed work. Decisions such as these should strike a balance between teacher autonomy and fairness to all teachers.

Artifacts to Consider for Inclusion in Teacher Portfolios

- Student work samples demonstrating growth over time including written assignments, assessment results, artwork, audio recordings, or videotaped performances
- Written feedback given to students
- Student process journal that captures student's understanding and use of teacher feedback
- Videos of instruction or interaction with students
- Standards-based lessons plans
- Photographs of active classroom environment
- Input from students, parents, community members
- Samples of teacher-designed assessments
- Supervisor observations/evaluations
- Letters from colleagues, parents and community members
- Schedules
- Student background and/or demographic information
- Professional development participation and information
- Awards and recognition
- Coursework certification

Designing a Teacher Portfolio System

1. Select teaching standards to evaluate with the portfolio.

Portfolios should be used as just one of multiple measures of teacher evaluation. First, determine which teaching standards from your district's teaching framework are being satisfactorily assessed by other components of the evaluation system (e.g., classroom observations, student performance measures, SLOs) and which are not, on a course-by-course basis. Consider closing the evaluation gaps with teacher portfolios. Also, it may be useful to consider which teaching standards need the most professional growth and reflection. This decision may be affected by the characteristics of the teaching population who will use portfolios: Will all teachers compile them or just novice teachers? Which teaching standards are higher priorities for these two groups of teachers?

2. Determine what combination of artifacts and written teacher entries will be used to demonstrate mastery of the standards.

    For any given teaching standard, teacher mastery may be evidenced by artifacts or teacher entries or self-reflection. For example, a teacher might demonstrate a teaching standard around progress monitoring of students by submitting completed formative assessments, results from the assessments, the written feedback that was provided to students based on the results and self-reflection regarding instructional adjustments made in response to results. Instructions to teachers should thoughtfully list required and optional artifacts to be included and pose specific questions for reflection. Narrowing the scope of the portfolio process, particularly around artifact collection, is critical to building an effective and sustainable system.

Teacher Self-Reflection in Rochester (New York) City School District

In Rochester (New York) City School District, teachers are given two portfolio-related options to count towards the "Other Measures" weighted at 60 percent of their overall evaluation.

One option is a "Structured Review of Student Work" for which teachers reflect on their contribution to student progress across work samples of three students. Rochester stresses the professional growth aspect of this component by noting that "teachers should remember that they are not being evaluated by how students do on the assignments" and prompts teachers to respond to the following prompts:

   A. How did the needs of the students in this class affect your planning? Describe any instructional challenges represented in this class.
   B. What were your learning goals for each unit? How were your selected assessments connected to the overall goals of the unit?
   C. Write a separate paragraph in which you describe the following for each of the three students:
      a. Describe each student's skills.
      b. What does the student work indicate to you regarding the student's progress toward attaining the learning goals?
   D. Write a concluding analysis reflecting on the following questions:
      a. Comment on the feedback you provided the students.
      b. As your compare and contrast the student responses to the instructional assessments, what did you learn about each student's conceptual understanding?
      c. Based upon the student responses, what would you consider changing as you prepare to teach this instructional unit again?

(Rochester City Schools, 2012)

Other important questions to consider when determining artifact and self-reflection requirements:

- **Will the portfolio be electronic or a traditional format (e.g., expandable folders, three-ring binders, hanging folders)?** The former might allow the inclusion of richer materials and increase the efficiency of the creation and evaluation processes.

Electronic Portfolios in Tennessee

Districts in Tennessee use the *Growth in Learning Determination System (GLADiS)* to electronically compile and evaluate teacher portfolios. Steps include the following:

- Teacher identifies targeted learning objectives in three out of four performing arts domains (Perform, Create, Respond and Connect) for which aligned work samples will be selected. Standards must be identified for all courses the teacher leads (e.g., dance and theater).
- Teacher collects and uploads at least five student evidence "pairs" demonstrating progress across two points in time, for either individual students or groups of students. Tennessee provides guidelines for the "purposeful sampling" of students across all ability levels as well as exceptional learners (e.g., gifted and talented, students with disabilities). Group evidence may not represent the entire portfolio.
- Teacher pre-scores student's progress and provides reflection regarding how the submitted work demonstrates student progress and their contribution to the student's growth.
- A blind review committee consisting of content-specific exemplary teacher accesses the portfolios electronically. Each evidence pair is scored on a scale of 1–5 and weighted equally before summing for an overall score.

(Memphis City Schools, 2011)

- **Are there specific content standards that should be prioritized?** Consider requiring the inclusion of artifacts and reflection entries that address them.

- **How much choice will teachers have in selecting artifacts and topics of reflection?** A combination of required and optional elements should strike a balance between empowering teachers and maintaining a consistent baseline level of evidence across teachers. Teachers may be provided a "menu" from which to select entries. Teachers should be required to justify why they include specific artifacts. This can reveal more about a teacher's contribution to growth than the actual artifacts (Painter, 2001).

- **Will students play a role in selecting work to showcase their improvement over time?** Students benefit when they reflect on and select work that demonstrates their own growth (Painter, 2001). The benefits of their inclusion should be balanced with consistency of approach across students.

3. Determine a portfolio scoring and evaluation system.

Portfolios may be evaluated using a rubric or checklist. A rubric that uses at least three performance levels is recommended in order to attain meaningful differentiation of portfolio scores across teachers. The indicators of the rubric should contain evaluative criteria for both artifacts and teacher reflections. Danielson and McGreal (2000) have cautioned against implementing portfolios without having clear criteria for their

evaluation. It is essential that the solicited artifacts and reflective prompts are aligned with the *highest performance level* of the rubric to ensure transparency and fairness to the teacher. Make the rubric widely available.

Although there is a considerable subjective dimension to evaluation of student growth using portfolios, a well-designed system using at least two raters can ensure accuracy of scores within an acceptable range of disagreement (Goldberg, 2011). It is recommended that at least one rater be in a supervisory role. Other teachers also may be a part of the review team provided they are masters of the same growth targets being evaluated. If teacher-experts are used, then portfolio submissions should be anonymous. As the number of teaching standards evaluated by the portfolio increases, the more difficult it will be to maintain interrater reliability. The use of electronic portfolios supports remote scoring, which may increase the pool of qualified evaluators (Goldberg, 2011).

Assessing Teaching Practices Beyond Classroom Observation and Student Achievement

One strength of portfolio usage is the capability to measure performance on dimensions of teacher practice that are not observable through classroom observations or student assessment. The following example demonstrates the quality of artifact evidence corresponding to four teacher performance levels for a teaching standard that is common to various teaching frameworks.

Teaching Standard	Advanced	Proficient	Minimal Effort	Unsatisfactory
Communicating with parents on a regular basis.	Teacher provides 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 classroom newsletter and take-home folder is missing.

(Adapted from McNelly, 2002)

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