Teacher-Centered Professional Development: A Rationale for Professional Portfolios

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This article presents a rationale for why school communities should consider using portfolios as a vehicle for promoting and assessing professional development in teachers. After a brief critique of the current state of teacher evaluation, a research-based rationale for using professional portfolios is provided along with practical suggestions on how educators might design, develop, and implement a portfolio assessment system in their school communities. The article concludes with a description of how one school district in Pennsylvania began the process of using professional portfolios as an alternative to their traditional evaluation process.

Introduction

For the past several years, the use of "portfolios" as a means of engaging students in their own learning experience has received positive endorsement from educational theorists and practitioners. Portfolio-type assessment has also been recognized for its potential in improving teacher education programs. As educators continue to recognize the need to bridge the gap between teacher training and classroom practice, portfolios are seen as an attractive vehicle for establishing performance criteria, for assessing individual and program strengths, and for collecting various demonstrations of excellence. With this purpose in mind, professional portfolios may also serve as an instrument for promoting the professional growth of teachers. This article has two major objectives. First, it provides a theoretical framework for examining the current system of supervision and evaluation with an eye on improving classroom instruction and promoting professional development. A research-based rationale for using professional portfolios is provided along with practical suggestions on how educators might design, develop, and implement a portfolio assessment system in their school communities. Second, the article describes how one school district in Pennsylvania began the process of using professional portfolios as an alternative to their traditional evaluation process.

The Current State of Teacher Evaluation

Despite all we know about the importance of active learning, effective schools, curriculum alignment, strategic planning, national standards, tracking, site-based management, and the myriad of other equally important issues that impact student learning, in truth the greatest influence on student learning was always and remains the classroom teacher. It is therefore reasonable to assert that any real improvement in the quality of teaching and learning will depend in large measure on the following three conditions: (a) the commitment of classroom teachers to continually assess and improve upon their own teaching as measured by student performance, (b) the willingness of teachers to collaborate with their colleagues to improve the quality of teaching and learning at the school level, and (c) the recognition that teachers must have a central role in shaping and developing their profession. If one agrees with these premises, the need to better understand what teachers do after they close their classroom door becomes as apparent as the need to encourage teachers to open themselves to the opportunity to learn more about their own teaching and the teaching of others in their school and in their profession.

How best to foster teacher commitment to continual improvement and collaboration with other teachers within their schools and their profession raises certain important questions:

- How are we currently judging the quality of teaching in the classroom?
- How are teachers currently assessing their own strengths and weaknesses?
- In what ways are teachers rewarded for learning about and utilizing the latest available content and

teaching knowledge?

- How are teachers encouraged to establish goals and learner outcomes that are consistent with the goals and learner outcomes of their school and their profession?

- In what ways are teachers encouraged to integrate what they learn in professional development activities into their classroom practice?

- How are teachers currently encouraged to collaborate with other teachers?

Although one could respond at length to each of these questions detailing how *some teachers*, *certain schools* and *various programs* are encouraging reflection, collaboration, and coordination, most of us know the more honest answer is simply that, by and large, very little is being done in these areas. Yet much of what we hope to accomplish in our efforts to improve student learning is hinged on the willingness and ability of teachers and administrators - both individually and collectively - to readily respond to these questions in a manner that satisfies the above three conditions. It is not my purpose here to provide a balanced or comprehensive picture of the teacher evaluation process. Indeed, if that was the task much might be written about the success of this or that program in certain school districts around the country. I do believe, however, that there is a major gap between where we are and where we want to be in terms of assessing self-growth and collaborative endeavors. Bridging this gap may require a change in the way in which teaching is evaluated because current practice fails to promote or reward the level of professional involvement required to achieve high performance standards in ourselves and in our students. Instead, teachers should consider assessing their own growth and performance with a portfolio approach similar to that used by other professionals and consistent with the movement toward authentic performance assessment used in a growing number of classrooms.

Under the current system, teacher evaluation is typically done by an administrator (vice-principal) or quasi-administrator (head of the department) with little if any involvement of other faculty. This creates an unauthentic context for professional growth and collaboration, often wrought with compromise or, in some cases, confrontation. As a consequence, administrators tend to be overly objective and calculating in their approach, often avoiding issues that are at the core of student learning.

Nearly 25 years ago, Gage and Winne questioned this calculated approach to teacher evaluation arguing that performance should not be based solely on objective data but rather require that the teacher "search for meaning in experience" (1972, p. 152). This search for meaning and authentic experience is too often missing in the daily practice of our teachers. Most schools, despite what they strive to provide for their students, do not serve well as learning communities for teachers. Classroom teachers go about doing what they see to be their job-- teaching the curriculum, maintaining an orderly classroom, building self-esteem, and so on--in isolation with little *genuine engagement* with other teachers (beyond the perfunctory grade-level, team or department meetings). As Barth (1991) asserts:

> Those who value public education, those who hope to improve our schools, should be worried about the stunted growth of teachers. Teacher growth is closely related to pupil growth. Probably nothing within a school has more impact on students in terms of skills development, self-confidence, or classroom behavior than the personal and professional growth of their teachers. The crux of teachers professional growth, I feel, is the development of a capacity to observe and analyze the consequences for students of different teaching behaviors and materials [and] teachers need to be able to relate their classroom behaviors to what other teachers are doing in their classrooms. Teachers think they are doing that. Many do, but many do not do it very systematically or regularly (p. 49).

Providing teachers the opportunity to grow professionally in concert with other teachers and in ways that promote school, district, and professional performance standards should be the single most important criterion for judging the quality of professional development programs and the teacher evaluation process. The next section of this article provides suggestions on how portfolios might be used to achieve these purposes.

Portfolios: Promoting and Demonstrating Professional Growth

Portfolios have been defined in many ways depending on their purpose. Frequently, we use the examples of artists, architects, and photographers to explain what portfolios mean to other professions. McTighe (1994) described portfolios in a meaningful way for teachers: "Portfolios are lasting repositories of materials which preserve and attest to the growth, achievement and increased maturity throughout [a teacher's career]" (p. 2). For the past several years, the use of "portfolios" as a means of engaging students in their own learning experience has received positive endorsement from educational theorists and practitioners (Frazier & Paulson, 1992; Reichel, 1994; Shepard, 1989; Wolf, 1989).

Portfolio-type assessment has also been recognized for its potential in improving teacher education programs (Viechnicki et al., 1993) As educators continue to recognize the need to bridge the gap between teacher training and classroom practice (Rikard & Beacham, 1992; Report

on the Commission on the Education of Teachers, 1991; Valli, 1992), teacher training programs are gradually focusing their attention on performance--what beginning teachers need to know and be able to do. Portfolios are seen here as an attractive device for establishing performance criteria, for assessing individual and program strengths, and for collecting the various demonstrations of excellence.

Teacher portfolios have also been advanced as a means to improve college teaching (Seldin, 1991; Seldin & Annis, 1990) Seldin explains the interest in teaching portfolios in higher education: "Today, the nation's colleges and universities are attempting to respond to new understandings about what elements define effective teaching. And at the same time, they are beset by public pressures to improve their systems of teaching accountability. Both [of these] challenges can be met, at least in part, through the use of the teaching portfolio" (p. 1).

Most relevant to the professional development of in-service teachers, portfolios are being used as an essential component of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification process (Baratz-Snowden, 1990; NBPTS, 1991). In January 1995, 81 teachers were board certified by NBPTS, a movement that continues to receive broad support among educators, business leaders, governors and the presidents of the nation's two largest teacher unions, (*New York Times*, January 6, 1995). Noting that there are currently few ways of rewarding and encouraging excellent teaching, Albert Shanker stated that "Board certification can provide an incentive for these teachers to stay in the classroom where they can go on giving kids the benefit of their knowledge and skill - and where they can help other teachers improve the way they teach" (Shanker, 1995, p. 34).

Using portfolios as the criteria for board certification is commendable and demonstrates how portfolios can be used to measure excellence in teaching. But can we afford to limit ourselves to *a few good teachers*? Perhaps it is time to consider using portfolios as a standard for promoting and demonstrating the professional growth of all teachers. The following examples are provided as illustrations of the possible advantages of using portfolios:

- Portfolios encourage teachers to "begin with the end in mind" (Covey, 1991, p. 95), and establish their mission, goals and learner outcomes consistent with their own philosophy and the goals of their school community.

- Portfolios are best prepared in consultation with others, and therefore provide a naturally setting for collegial interaction.

- Portfolios provide clear evidence of what is important to the teacher and serve as a way for teachers to align what's important to them with what's important to their school district and their profession.

- Portfolios motivate teachers to be reflective and selective, identifying what is really important to them as teachers and members of the school and professional communities.

- Portfolios allow there to be certain required items important to the goals of the district as well as elective items which are of special interest to the individual teacher.

- Portfolios enable teachers to display their accomplishments for examination by others. And, in the process, they contribute both to [professionally] sound personnel decisions and to the professional development of individual faculty members (Seldin, 1991).

- Portfolios can serve as the basis of criteria for how well a teacher is doing according to established criteria and as a catalyst for discussion on ways for continuous improvement thereby encouraging teachers to continually reflect on and renew their teaching skills and knowledge-base.

Portfolios and Professional Development

As noted earlier, the great challenge to our current process of evaluating teachers lies in the competing and sometimes contradictory aim of nurturing professional growth while measuring accountability. This is no less a challenge to portfolio assessment. Clearly, the fundamental question on the minds of those involved in the development and evaluation of teacher portfolios must be: Who judges the quality of the portfolios and by what standards? Some insight into the answer to this important question can be found in the research of Loucks-Horsley (1987) who identified what are considered the ten most important characteristics of successful teacher development. Their findings provide a framework for arguing the case for teacher portfolios and a basis for developing an effective professional portfolio assessment program.

Collegiality and Collaboration

Hilliard (1991) emphasized the importance of collaboration when he insisted that "Teachers need their own intellectual and emotional hunger to be fed. They need to experience the joy of collaborative discussion, dialogue, critique, and research" (p. 36). This need for collaboration is considered by some as the critical factor in the success of any change or reform process (Fullan, 1991; Raywid, 1993). As earlier noted, collaboration in the development, implementation, and assessment of teacher portfolios is at the heart of the process. A "portfolio development team" consisting of "portfolio consultants," colleagues, and instruc-

tional leaders (e.g. assistant principal, department chair, team leader) should assist the teacher in the beginning and throughout the process. Any portfolio that does not incorporate exchange of ideas and partnerships with other professionals would likely be inconsistent with thoughtful school and district goals.

Experimentation and Risk Taking

Roland Barth argued persuasively that "If we want students to be less docile and more inventive and adventuresome in their thinking, then adults must model risk taking as well as learning. If we want to improve schools, we must risk doing things differently next September than we did them last September" (Barth, 1991, p. 164). Under the current system of teacher evaluation there is little incentive for teachers to be risk takers. Yet we know that continuous improvement requires that we take a chance on new ideas and strategies. Portfolios can not only encourage innovation, they can provide the license to take risks.

Incorporation of Available Knowledge Bases

A well constructed professional portfolio will encourage teachers to reflect on three important areas: (a) the content of what they are teaching, (b) strategies in how best to teach, and (c) applying the content and strategies into their everyday practice. Schools and portfolio assessment teams that emphasize the incorporation of available knowledge bases as a critical component of a portfolio recognize the important (and often missing) link between professional development activities (e.g. workshops, in-service programs, graduate education) and classroom teaching.

Appropriate Participant Involvement in Goal Setting, Implementation, Evaluation, and Decision Making

Portfolios are ideally suited to accomplish this important element of successful professional development. Teachers are not only involved throughout the process, they are at the center of the process. Given the opportunity to reflect on what constitutes a fair representation of quality teaching, there can be little doubt that most thoughtful teachers will consider their work in light of the overall mission of the school and district. In so doing, these professional portfolios become the collective blueprint for school improvement.

Time to Work on Staff Development and Assimilate New Learnings

Most notably documented by Lortie (1975) and addressed in numerous reports (e.g., the National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) it has been acknowledged that teachers work in isolation with little time for collaboration. This condition has prompted an escalating recognition that teachers need time to collaborate with each other. The absence of this opportunity is an obstacle to most school improvement initiatives, and would certainly diminish the potential value of professional portfolios. A key element of any school's portfolio assessment program must be the articulation between and amongst teachers on educational goals, learner outcomes, and so forth. Naturally, time to work on the development of the portfolio is essential. As high school teacher Bill Chaffin opined, "If we were true professionals, we would be given the time to engage in some reflective practices at school that would make it much easier for people to go through the change process" (*Teacher Magazine*, Nov. 1993, p. 38).

Leadership and Sustained Administrative Support

Anyone who takes a serious look at past attempts at promoting change at the school level recognizes the important role that administrators play in the success or failure of that innovation. Seldin (1991) argued that one thing we have learned about using portfolios for teacher development is that "Top-level administrators must give their active support to the teaching portfolio concept. That means they must be publicly committed and must provide the necessary resources to the project" (p. 28). Beyond this administrative endorsement, the success of portfolio assessment will unquestionably depend on the genuine support of teachers and their professional associations.

Appropriate Incentives and Rewards

Most management and personnel textbooks include a chapter on how best to motivate employees through rewards and incentives. Rebore (1987), for example, advises that "Not all individuals value the same type of rewards. Consequently, a rewards program must be flexible enough to meet the expectations of [the] individual [and] structured in such a way that a person will realize he is acting in his own best interest when he is acting in the interest of the school district" (pp. 237-238). The bottom line in all that is written on the topic of what motivates individuals to perform "above and beyond the call of duty" may be bluntly summed up by the following question, "What's in it for me?" Many teachers find the answer to that question in the satisfaction of knowing that they make a difference in the lives of their students. Portfolios are well suited to promote an intrinsic reward system by increasing teachers' participation in the decision-making process, providing opportunities for personal growth, and diversity of challenging activities (Rebore, 1987). Professional recognition, grants for classroom projects, promotion to Master Teacher status, and paid mentoring responsibilities are a few of many possible extrinsic rewards that could motivate teachers--under the right circumstances. Unfortunately, the current structure of evaluating and rewarding teacher performance does not encourage teachers, either intrinsically or extrinsically, to stretch themselves to reach high performance standards.

Designs Built on Principles of Adult Learning and the Change Process

Lewis (1988) cautions that with faculty development it is important that no one is identified as a "poor" teacher. "The assumption is that all of us have things about our teaching that could be improve" (p. 104). Emphasizing this point throughout the portfolio development and assessment process acknowledges what we know about adult learning. The emerging literature on how adults learn suggests why past innovations may have failed and provides insight into how best to engage teachers in the process. Lawler (1991),

for example, offers six keys to facilitating adult learning: (a) understand and reduce anxiety, (b) elicit and incorporate expectations, (c) acknowledge and utilize experience, (d) provide and encourage active participation, (e) identify and incorporate relevant content, and (f) facilitate change and growth. Facilitating change is perhaps the greatest challenge facing educational leaders in this era of reform (Fullan, 1991; Morgolis, 1991), and understanding the nature of the change process as it applies to the introduction of teacher portfolios is important indeed.

Integration of Individual Goals with School and District Goals

The importance of aligning teacher goals with district goals is illustrated in the outcome-based education (OBE) movement; a reform initiative which emphasizes the need for establishing meaningful learner outcomes and high stakes performance standards (Nyland, 1991; Shepard, 1989; Spady, 1988; Wiggins, 1989; Wolf, 1989).The lesson learned from the OBE movement is that the challenging task of building community consensus on what students should know and be able to do pales in comparison to making that happen in the classroom. Teacher portfolios have the potential to enable a school district to achieve its goals if the portfolio is assessed, in part, on how well individual teachers strive to promote district goals. In so doing, the integration of individual goals with school and district goals is achieved.

Formal Placement of the Program within the Philosophy and Organizational Structure of the School and District

The degree to which teacher portfolios will improve teaching and learning will be directly linked to the status they are afforded in the overall mission and function of the school and school district. If portfolios are used merely to check off how teachers are doing--in a manner similar to the current evaluation practices—their value will be limited. If, however, teacher portfolios are considered the showcase for individuals to demonstrate their growth and accomplishments in their classroom, in their school community, and in their profession, then portfolios could have a tremendous impact. For this to happen, portfolios must have a formal place within the philosophy and organization of the school and district.

If introduced in a thoughtful manner, and developed according to the above principles, teacher portfolios can be an important part of a comprehensive program to improve teacher performance and student learning. Specific questions on how best to design, development, and implement professional portfolios at the school and school district level are best answered in a manner which is responsive to the unique qualities of the particular school community. The final section of this article describes the experience of one school district that introduced the portfolio assessment process as means of promoting individual, team, and district goals.

The Pilot Project

Springfield School District is a suburban school district in southeastern Pennsylvania. Like a number of other districts, Springfield has been engaged for the past few years in a process of self-renewal with a strong emphasis on first defining what excellence in education means and then designing a performance-based system that will enable all children to achieve that excellence. In a document entitled, *Excellence in Every Classroom*, the district declared that an excellent classroom . . .

> is project driven, has a curriculum integration focus with a emphasis on problem solving; promotes students as workers, teachers as coordinators; uses fewer textbooks--lots of authentic resources and manipulatives; offers choice of challenge in learning; focuses on in-depth rather than breadth of learning; requires lots of learner presentations and creations; puts quality work on display; generates a climate of excitement, enthusiasm, and high interest; employs ongoing authentic assessment including learner self-direction; is communication rich; is developmentally appropriate and inclusive; is technology rich; creates a culture of mutual respect and cooperation; is a place where all succeed and thrive!

School district leaders recognize that achieving this level of excellence in every classroom will require considerable and concerted effort. Over the past three years the district has engaged in a comprehensive strategic planning process which resulted in clearly defined school community beliefs, a mission statement, development of action plans, and strategies for achieving the following objectives:

- Every student will have a continuing portfolio that encompasses the various areas of successful participation in school and the community.
- All graduates will demonstrate competency in higher order thinking skills, computer literacy, communication skills and social responsibility.
- All students will graduate after successfully completing the proficiency requirements of their instructional program.

Professional portfolios are not considered by the district as the single vehicle for achieving these objectives, but rather as part of a multifaceted approach to achieving excellence in the classroom, school, and entire school community. An important criteria for assessing the quality of these portfolios was the extent to which the portfolios demonstrated working toward the achievement of these district goals as well individual and portfolio team goals.

Participant and Project Details

The participants in the portfolio pilot program included elementary and secondary level teachers and school counselors who were selected by the building principals as self-directed learners. In addition to being risk-takers, these individuals have demonstrated leadership and an amenability to change. A unique feature of the portfolio project was that the principals of each respective school also agreed to participate in the project by developing their own professional portfolios. In January, 1996 ten teachers, two school counselors, and four principals began developing their professional portfolios.

An initial gathering of the participants took place in November, 1995. At that time, the coordinators of the project discussed the purpose of the project, explained the rationale for using professional portfolios as an alternative to traditional evaluation, and designated the portfolio teams based on school assignment. Participants were challenged to identify the individual and team goals that wold provide the focus of their portfolio activities. In January, 1996 a two hour workshop was conducted to discuss individual, team, and district goals and to begin the process of shaping the content, organization, and assessment of a professional portfolio. Participants were reminded that the nature of the pilot project placed great importance on learning from their feedback and experience. Participants were asked to take minutes at their team meetings and to keep a journal. It was suggested that the journal be open-ended and individualized to suit the needs of each unique personality. Journals might include an ongoing account of thoughts and reflections on the portfolio process as well commentaries, concerns, and recommendations for enhancing the experience. Participants were reminded that their journals would be vital to the improvement and expansion of the project.

The Portfolio Contents

The question of what should be included in the portfolio is best considered in light of what is important to each teacher, administrator, school, and district. Portfolios that represent the unique qualities of teachers and school communities will be the most powerful. The following list of what might be included in a portfolio, based on the principles of teaching, professional growth, and service, was suggested to the Springfield participants as a framework for building their portfolios.

Statement of Goals and Philosophy of Teaching

The work of teachers is very much influenced by the philosophy they carry regarding teaching, learning, and knowledge. For example, many thoughtful writers have argued that a liberal studies curriculum founded on the principles of the Western canon should be the basis for education while others have persuasively argued for an emphasis on the learning process. Portfolios provide teachers and administrators the opportunity to contemplate their goals and philosophy of teaching in a way that considers the goals of their school and their profession. In a sense, this becomes their credo and serves as the preamble to their portfolio.

Summary of Professional Responsibilities and Involvements

Each portfolio should include a statement describing professional responsibilities along with other assigned duties, voluntary involvements, and professional development activities. This section might include information on classes taught, student load, activities sponsored, involvement in curriculum development projects, mentoring responsibilities, graduate course work, conferences attended, etc. Essentially, this section of the portfolio serves as both a resume of the professional activities of the educator (both in and outside the classroom) and a description of the circumstances in which the responsibilities and involvements were carried out. It would be important for a high school teacher to note, for example, that she was asked to teach two new and different courses in a given year or that an elementary school teacher had twenty-nine students, four of whom were identified with attention deficit disorder.

Criteria for Assessing Teaching Performance

This section details the steps teachers have taken to evaluate and improve their teaching.Seldin (1991) suggests that this section include changes resulting from self-evaluation, time spent reading journals on improving teaching, participation in seminars, workshops and professional meetings on improving teaching. The following list suggests other items that might be included in this section:

- examples of new thematic units developed
- learner outcomes achieved by students that are consistent with department or grade level outcomes and school and district learner outcomes
- student evaluations
- statements from colleagues who have observed teaching
- reports on student academic progress
- samples of student work (e.g. student portfolios)
- use of creative approaches to teaching (e.g. cooperative learning)
- statements from administrators who have evaluated teaching performance
- pictures or descriptions of how the teacher has created an engaging learning environment
- documented use of instructional technology

- use of authentic, rich means for authentically assessing student performance
- model lesson and unit plans
- communicating with parents about student progress
- honors or other recognitions of outstanding teaching
- video of sample lesson

Criteria for Assessing Service to School and Profession

This article opened with the argument that three conditions must persist if we hope to achieve any real improvement in the quality of teaching and learning: (a) the commitment of classroom teachers to continually assess and improve upon their own teaching as measured by student performance, (b) the willingness of teachers to collaborate with their colleagues to improve the quality of teaching at the school level, and (c) the recognition that teachers must have a central role in shaping and developing their profession. In the last section of their portfolio, teachers demonstrate how they worked toward meeting the first condition. In this section,teachers demonstrate how they strived to meet the challenges of the second and third condition. Contributions that might be featured in this section include:

- sponsoring clubs
- coaching
- participation in local, state, regional, or national activities related to teaching and the teaching profession
- leadership involvements
- sharing lesson plans
- organizing workshops
- serving as a cooperating teacher to a student teacher providing evidence of the steps taken to provide a successful experience for the student teacher and the students
- serve as a mentor to a beginning teacher providing evidence of the steps taken to provide a successful experience for the student teacher and the students
- contributions to education journals
- serving on a leadership task force
- serving on a portfolio assessment team
- advising students
- tutoring
- serving on curriculum development committee
- serving as a portfolio adviser

Lessons Learned

The following observations about the portfolio proce are derived from interviews with participants in the pil study, a review of their journal entries, and an assessme of their completed portfolios:

1. The portfolios enabled participants to begin to re ognize how much they actually do. In the wor of one participant, "I am discovering that there a lot that I have done that has been largely unre ognized. [Portfolios provide] a nice opportunityf others to see some of the efforts we put forth daily One of the real benefits of portfolios is that th provide a much needed showcase for organizir and demonstrating excellent performance.

2. Portfolios require a great deal of effort. As o participant wrote, "What have I gotten myself in now? This portfolio assessment is going to take lot more time than I expected." Another con mented, "I am very happy about this project, whi at the same time I am worried about the time con mitment it represents." It was apparent from mar of the interviews and journal entries that keepir on track with the project is going to be a gre challenge. On-going administrative support, e couragement, and release time for team meetin may be the key to the success of portfolios. Scho leaders will also need to recognize that portfoli done in isolation of other systemic change initi tives will not likely succeed in meeting their fu purpose.

3. A number of participants wrote that developing statement of philosophy of education was difficu The following comment is typical of a number the participants' remarks. "Hitting a road blo writing a philosophy of teaching--tried to wri one but I am not able to put anything down paper." Because it is essential that educators u

derstand their philosophical beliefs about teaching and learning, it would be a wise to invest time in helping participants develop these belief statements.

4. Gauging the level of "top down" involvement in the portfolio process will be difficult. The promise of professional portfolio assessment is based on the concept of collegial discourse. Neither the extent to which portfolio progress should be monitored by portfolio consultants nor the optimal frequency of general meetings could be adequately measured from this project. Nevertheless, this is an important area for consideration, especially if portfolio assessment is used more extensively as an alternative to the traditional method of administrative evaluation.

5. Although all participants were provided common guidelines, a review of the completed portfolios showed important differences in both the content and composition. While this finding demonstrates the potential that portfolios have in highlighting the unique qualities and contributions of individual teachers, it also calls attention to the need for a well defined framework that includes clear and specific criteria for assessment. Without this structure, it will be difficult or impossible to use professional portfolios as a formal component of the evaluation process.

Conclusion

In closing I want to reiterate the basic tenet of this paper: teachers must be front and center in our effort to improve the quality of teaching and learning in our schools. This is the most salient point in the whole discussion on professional portfolios. If portfolios are prescribed by those "on the top" for "those at the bottom" they will fail to achieve their broader purposes as defined in this article. If, however, teachers and administrators are willing to engage in honest dialogue about the potential as well as limitations of the portfolio concept, there is good reason to believe that portfolios may emerge as a catalyst for promoting professional growth and for recognizing teachers for their contributions. More schools and more classrooms will become places where teachers welcome the opportunity to reflect more on their own teaching and the teaching of others in their school and in their profession.

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