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Classroom Portfolios Used as Alternative Teacher-Evaluation Measure

By **Erik W. Robelen**

Video footage of students sight-reading a musical score, or reciting a speech from Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar." Digital photos of students' self-portraits. Samples of student-penned research papers and other assignments. Those are the types of documentation hundreds of arts educators in Tennessee recently assembled as evidence of their impact on student learning.

The state this year is ramping up an alternative component to its teacher-evaluation system for the arts that tackles a thorny question many states are grappling with: how to evaluate teachers on student growth when standardized-test scores are not available.

The answer in this Tennessee enterprise is portfolios of classroom work. And not just the final, polished products, but the before and after, showing student improvement over time. Teachers submit their portfolios electronically to the state, and they are scored by trained peer reviewers, who are fellow arts educators.

Three districts participated this past school year in the new system. At least 11 will do so this academic year, including some of the state's largest districts, according to state officials.

The **Tennessee Fine Arts Growth Measures System** is voluntary for districts, but if a district signs on, all arts educators must participate.

The state this year is also rolling out a similar initiative for world-language teachers. And work is underway on one for those teaching physical education.

The effort comes as many states require that evaluation systems weigh as one component teachers' contributions to student gains in learning. The issue gets complicated in subjects beyond reading and math for which standardized testing is less frequent or not administered at all. Tennessee has no statewide arts assessments.

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"Teachers want to demonstrate their effectiveness, they really do," said Dru Davison, the fine arts adviser for the 150,000-student Shelby County district, which includes Memphis. "But they want it to be based on what they actually do in the classroom and the value they bring to their kids. They want to feel empowered and to be honored for the professionals that they are."

Mr. Davison, who played a lead role in developing the system, added, "If we have accountability systems that go against those principles, then we're shooting ourselves in the foot."

'Model' Approach

The program has drawn national notice, including [praise from U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan](#).

Laura D. Goe, a research scientist at the Educational Testing Service who is part of its Understanding Teaching Quality Research Group, said she sees real promise in the initiative.

"Tennessee has the right idea in promoting this effort to achieve some rigor and comparability in a set of content that is difficult to measure," she said. "To me, it is a model for where we want to ultimately go [with teacher evaluation], and where I think we will go in most subjects."

Indeed, North Carolina is using the Tennessee approach as a model for its own pilot program to evaluate teachers in the arts, world languages, health, and physical education, as well as for those who teach Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses.

Representative of All

The Tennessee initiative began two years ago with a pilot in the Memphis school system (recently merged into a larger district for Shelby County). This past year, 435 educators took part across three districts, state officials said.

Atticus S. Hensley, the band director for two middle schools in [Tullahoma, Tenn.](#), who participated this past year and was involved in its design, said many arts educators have welcomed it.

"Half of our evaluation was coming from some source we had no control over," he said. "For arts teachers, that was really frustrating."

Sara Heyburn, an assistant commissioner at the Tennessee department of education, said the new measure was developed with a clear eye on that problem.

"We knew there were many subjects and grades for which we didn't have individual growth measures," she said. "Ultimately, what we wanted was that the measure first and foremost would be helpful in informing student growth and lead to increased learning for students, but also reflect a spectrum of performance for teachers."

She also said a priority was to set up a process that educators find beneficial to their practice.

The portfolio evaluation is focused on four domains: perform, create, respond, and connect.



Students point to the beginning of a musical measure during Atticus Hensley's band class at East Middle School in Tullahoma Tenn. on Sept. 12.
—Josh Anderson for Education Week

Teachers must submit five batches of student work samples, called “evidence collections,” with a self-rating for each. They also must explain their work and the context for those submissions. At least two of the five collections must show differentiated instruction for students at varying levels of skill and ability and represent growth of students at those levels.

The portfolio generally accounts for 35 percent of a teacher’s score on their evaluation. Fifty percent is based on classroom observations from the school principal. The other 15 percent is based on a different student-achievement component, including data from state tests or other assessments. However, if the portfolio score is stronger than this last measure, it may be used to count for half the teacher’s evaluation.

Mr. Davison from Shelby County said the portfolio is all about evidence of growth.

“You can’t just put in the beautiful, polished performance or painting,” he said. “Also, we’ve got to see how that teacher is impacting kids of different groupings. How are you growing your special-needs kids? If you have [Advanced Placement] kids playing concertos, how are you growing those kids?”

Jeffrey A. Chipman, who teaches vocal music at Bellevue Middle School in Memphis, said the portfolio evaluation is improving his practice.

“To be able to say, ‘This is where they were and this is how I helped them get here’ is powerful,” he said.

Jackie Norman, a visual-arts teacher at Tullahoma High School, was leery when she first heard about the new system, lamenting the “constant evaluation of teachers” in Tennessee. “So our initial reaction was: Another one?”

But she’s now a fan. “It is a true measurement of a teachers’ teaching ability,” she said.

The evidence teachers submit must be pegged to the Tennessee arts standards, be representative of their courseload, and contain evidence of varying time spans (from at least two points in time), a state overview says. Each portfolio is assessed by one peer reviewer, but it’s subject to one or more additional reviews if the score varies significantly from the teacher’s self-assessment.

'Respecting' Teachers

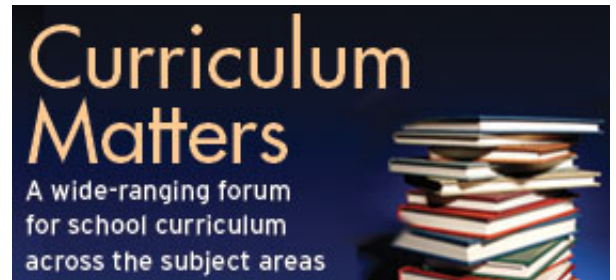
Steven Seidel, the director of the Arts in Education program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, said that while he’s not examined the Tennessee approach closely, he likes the sound of it, including the level of control handed to teachers—from playing a key role in its development to assembling the portfolios to having other educators conduct the reviews.

“This feels like a really significant ... step in the right direction of respecting teachers’ priorities, knowledge, and capacity to make serious evaluative judgments about their own work,” he said. Having other arts educators conduct the reviews “opens up the possibility ... of the whole system becoming a really powerful dimension of professional development,” he said.

But Mr. Seidel cautioned that it’s critical to stay the course.

“It’s very important that the state or district stays with the game and doesn’t change the game too often

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or too fast," he said. "And there has to be enough support and training" early on for participating teachers.

Marcy Singer-Gabella, an education professor at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College in Nashville, Tenn., and its associate chairwoman for teacher education, said she appreciates the focus on measures valued by arts educators.

"A real challenge with test-based accountability is the tasks are not recognized as representative of the learning teachers care about," she said. Here, the idea is for teachers to "select work that represents the kind of learning they are trying to approach and that is aligned with state and national standards."

She said it's critical for peer reviewers to get effective training and that the scoring process is carefully calibrated to ensure consistency. Also, she said it's critical that the reviewers are "deeply knowledgeable in the domain."

No process is perfect, Ms. Heyburn said, but the state has worked hard to make it fair and consistent.

"There is always human error and subjectivity in a portfolio process, but we've tried to make it as tight as possible," she said.

For the 435 arts teachers evaluated this year, the individual growth scores covered the spectrum, with 16 percent at Level 1 (significantly below expectations), 30 percent at Level 3 (at expectations), and 12 percent at Level 5 (significantly above expectations).

Ms. Singer-Gabella cautioned that scoring portfolios is expensive, including time to train reviewers and pay them.

Teachers say the process has its challenges, including the amount of time it took them to assemble their portfolios, not to mention technology glitches with the online portal.

But echoing the comments of others, Mr. Chipman from Bellevue Middle Schools says it's worth it.

"We're in an age of accountability and quantifying just about everything that you can quantify," he said, "so providing teachers with a way to actually show what they're doing in class is very different from a bubble-in test. It leaves the work in the hands of the practitioners, which is powerful."

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