Organizing Portfolios

"Creating the portfolio and preparing for the conference asks students to re-examine past work and to think about the strengths and the challenges of that work.

It demands reflection and evaluation and offers students an opportunity to report their progress in a way that engages them in purposeful conversation about learning with their parents," Carol Smith

One common method of structuring portfolios organizes work based on **subject-area classes**. Samples of work from each discipline are collected and form the basis for the conference conversation. Students discuss their accomplishments and their challenges, subject by subject, sometimes setting goals for improved work in a particular area. This is an improvement over the traditional 20-minute parent-teacher conferences of the past, but focuses on the "pieces" rather than on the "whole" content area.

In schools where teachers are attempting to integrate the curriculum around interests and concerns of adolescents, assessment and evaluation tools within the portfolio are created to connect **disciplines**. In these cases, focus is given to the connections of the pieces within a broader context of learning.

Student portfolios contain work samples from all areas of a student's school life, as well as documentation of other learning and accomplishments outside of school. All work, including that previously assessed by both teacher and student, is reexamined and sorted for inclusion in one of the Vital Results sections. For some students this is a difficult process since it is hard to look critically at work accomplished and then place it somewhere in the bigger picture of understanding what was actually learned. Even more difficult is to see this sorting, categorizing, analyzing, and generalizing as an integral piece of the learning process itself.

In Vermont, the "Vital Result Standards" from Vermont's Frameworks for Standards and Learning Opportunities offer a more global structure for a student's portfolio of work. The portfolio can be divided into sections of Vital Results: Communication, Reasoning and Problem Solving, Personal Development, and Civic and Social Responsibility. This division offers students a wider view of their accomplishments. It allows work from a variety of disciplines to be included in the same category, again reinforcing the connections among the disciplines and particular skills and attitudes. A multiple bar graph becomes less of a math assignment, the persuasive essay less of an English assignment, and both are seen more correctly as ways to communicate information and ideas. This reorganization of work away from the disciplines and into more global categories validates the relevance of the work in a larger context.