
The Employability Skills Portfolio

To demonstrate their value to future employers, Michigan students are learning to “discover, document, and develop” their skills.

PAUL STEMMER, BILL BROWN, AND CATHERINE SMITH

Students in school today may change careers as many as seven times during their lifetime. Each of the authors has changed jobs and career settings in the last decade. We use resumes, published papers, and personal letters of reference to document what we can do. Clearly, the workplace is demanding more from us than it did 10 years ago — and asking for more evidence that we can get the job done. Michigan is trying to prepare students for this type of workplace. During the 1990-91 school year, Michigan schools piloted an innovative portfolio approach to enable students to discover, document, and develop their employability skills.

The Portfolio Concept

As the first step in developing the portfolio idea, the Michigan Employability Skills Task Force — including leaders from business, labor, government, and education — determined the general skills that every student should have, not only for entry-level jobs but for jobs at all levels (see fig. 1). Then a subcommittee developed a prototype for the portfolio. The Employability Skills Portfolio (ESP) consists of:

- an Academic, a Personal Management, and a Teamwork folder;
- a Parent Guide for developing a student portfolio;

- a Portfolio Information Guide for students and teachers;
- an Employability Skills Summary Sheet for use in job interviews.

The portfolios contain evidence of students' attainment of employability skills in academics, personal management, and teamwork. A completed portfolio might hold numerous school records, personal journals, school awards and honors, sample schoolwork, and student-made resumes. Evidence of the academic skill of “writing in the language in which business is conducted,” for instance, might include a letter from a past or present employer. To show that he or she can “work without supervision,” a student might include a personal career plan or a letter of recommendation from a teacher. As an example of a teamwork skill such as “actively participating in a group,” a student

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could include documentation of membership in one or more organizations.

The basic premise of the profile is that learning is a lifelong process. Students upgrade their portfolios as they gain new or more advanced skills. ESP has no boundaries, neither setting a ceiling on the highest skills a student should complete nor minimum levels. Not an improved sorting system, ESP encourages students to recognize successes, seek opportunities to fill gaps in skills, and gain confidence in preparing for work.

Because there was little precedent (only Colorado¹ had established a similar project in 1983), it took us two years to prepare for the first-year pilot.

The Pilot's First Year

During the first year, state grants enabled districts to: (1) begin creating standard definitions for a quality portfolio, (2) identify training and resource needs, and (3) gain input from the business community.

The Intermediate School Districts (ISD) served as funding points, offered training resources, and helped choose local districts that were representative of the state in geography, racial/ethnic balance, and per-pupil revenue. The 22 districts chosen varied in size from a total student population (K-12) of 945 to more than 130,000. Per-pupil operating revenues varied from about \$3,000 to more than \$4,500. More than 5,000 students participated, from grades 6 through 12, in regular, special, and vocational education. Because Michigan is a large, populous state, we held regional

orientation workshops to give each pilot site a vision for the process.

Use of the Portfolio

Districts generally had encouraging results as they introduced the portfolio concept to students in the pilot phase. No district implemented the entire process during the first year. Some

districts, for example, focused instruction on the need for academic skills in the workplace, through writing assignments or newspaper clippings. Other districts stressed curriculum issues, while others emphasized counseling.

The most common activity was to document the student's Employability Skills in existing Education/Employability Development Plans. These plans — created by students, usually with involvement by parents and counselors — explore career and college options, map out courses and schedules, and summarize interests and aptitudes.

One promising idea had local business representatives review portfolios and provide each student with feedback — the ultimate in authentic assessment for this project. Employers were invited to the school in a mock interview setting. After reviewing students' portfolios, they evaluated the contents and indicated whether the students would qualify for jobs in their companies. Employers also gave students tips on improving their skills and documentation and also indicated their areas of strength and weakness.

Students also conducted interviews with workers, gave oral reports, and made presentations to the class on educational and personal management and skill requirements for various jobs and careers. At some schools, groups of students visited businesses, with teachers providing follow-up pointers back in the classroom.

Sites that had students actually begin developing portfolios reported considerable support from teachers, particularly as they saw positive effects, such as increased motivation, more interest in schoolwork, and increased self-esteem. Some schools promoted the portfolio through posters, assemblies, and newsletters. While teachers gave general directions

about the portfolio process, they created their own structures and processes to help students develop portfolios. For example, teachers might put a "P" on students' work to indicate that it should be placed in their portfolio, or they might say something like, "This is good work; you should save this as an example of your skills."

FIGURE 1

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS PROFILE

ACADEMIC SKILLS

- Read and understand written materials
- Understand charts and graphs
- Understand basic math
- Use mathematics to solve problems
- Use research and library skills
- Use specialized knowledge and skills to get a job done
- Use tools and equipment
- Speak in the language in which business is conducted
- Write in the language in which business is conducted
- Use scientific method to solve problems

PERSONAL MANAGEMENT SKILLS

- Attend school/work daily and on time
- Meet school/work deadlines
- Develop career plans
- Know personal strengths and weaknesses
- Demonstrate self-control
- Pay attention to details
- Follow written and oral instructions
- Follow written and oral directions
- Work without supervision
- Learn new skills
- Identify and suggest new ways to get the job done

TEAMWORK SKILLS

- Actively participate in a group
- Know the group's rules and values
- Listen to other group members
- Express ideas to other group members
- Be sensitive to the group members' ideas and views
- Be willing to compromise if necessary to best accomplish the goal
- Be a leader or a follower to best accomplish the goal
- Work in changing settings and with people of differing backgrounds

Not an improved sorting system, the portfolio project encourages students to recognize successes, seek opportunities to fill gaps in skills, and gain confidence in preparing for work.

To introduce the portfolios to all students in a particular grade, most schools selected a teacher who taught all the students, such as a 9th grade English teacher. Essays and papers about career search findings were placed in the students' portfolios. Other examples of materials students put in their portfolios included recognition awards, schoolwork, achievement test scores, performance appraisals from teachers, transcripts with class descriptions and grades for related classes, photographs or videotapes of completed projects, awards, news articles, letters from past/present employers, and so on. Often new awards — for example, for teamwork

— were devised with the intent that students could place them in their portfolios.

Some schools chose to maintain the portfolios on school premises — in classroom filing cabinets, small portable file holders (like “milk crates”), or in the library. Physical storage problems and concern with security of materials were common in teams using this approach. Schools that let students maintain their own portfolios fostered greater feelings of student ownership and did not report storage or security problems. One concern that did arise was that students were compiling materials that might not be perceived as relevant to employers. This presented a challenge to teachers, who had to find a means to help students understand the kinds of information that were important to include, while the students actually maintained control of the contents of the portfolio.

Generally, schools that focused on students rather than on system planning were more successful in implementing the portfolios.

Involvement by Teachers, Parents, and Businesses

Teachers became involved in the

If successful, the project will empower students to succeed in work or college, using an accurate portfolio displaying their accomplishments.

project as part of planning committees in each district; beyond this core group, teacher participation varied by district. In some, the pilot teams simply introduced the concepts and activities, letting their successes intrigue other teachers. In others, Employability Skills teams made presentations to staff at regular meetings or integrated the concept into school improvement team planning. One district developed performance contracts for the Employability Skills project.

Efforts to involve parents varied in effectiveness. A few districts developed particularly strong approaches through use of the Employability Skills Parent Guide. This guide explains the portfolio concept to parents with many suggestions for how to motivate their children to do their best. For example:

- *Give children responsibilities* at home to foster self-reliance, industriousness, resourcefulness, and routines for work.
- *Teach children to plan ahead* by requiring them to place school-work and household chores before play.
- *Learn about the school's expectations and practices* by talking directly with the principal and teachers, observing classrooms, and talking with other parents.

Many parents participated in interviews, gave class presentations about their jobs, wrote letters of support, and attended special training sessions. While the response from parents was positive, most districts reported the need for more ways to involve them.

To involve local businesses, many pilot sites integrated the project into existing partnerships through presentations, field trips, job shadowing, and job placement interviews. Stronger outreach efforts included the creation

of a business advisory group to work with schools in developing Employability Skills and the hiring of a part-time Employability Skills Coordinator. Other activities included planning for linkages between “Tech Prep” partnerships (between schools, businesses, and community colleges) and asking local business leaders to discuss

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employability skills from their perspectives with the school board, teachers, and in the classroom.

Emerging Issues

As a result of the first year's pilot, we know several issues we need to address. First, future orientation workshops must emphasize how educators can enlist greater involvement from parents and businesses. Getting educators, parents, and business leaders to work together as a team will be a major goal of the second year.

Another goal is to create a meaningful scoring system that will give useful feedback to the state and the local district for program evaluation and school improvement. Educators and employers need to use a sample of portfolios in developing standards for a scoring system.

Clearly, more training in a variety of assessment strategies also needs to be

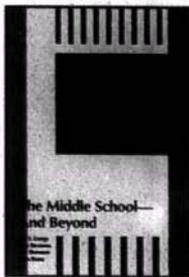
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part of the second-year workshops. Many districts have extensive assessment programs in place. One pilot goal was to integrate them into the portfolio so that students understand the test results they place in their own portfolio. No district addressed this problem fully.

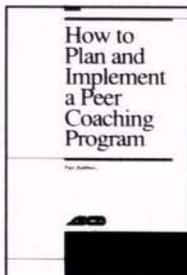
Creating Winners

The goal of the Employability Skills Profile is to help the youth in our state to develop strong employability skills, whether they plan to work during the school year, immediately after graduation, or after college. If successful, the project will also empower students to succeed in work or college, using an accurate portfolio displaying their accomplishments. The ESP system embraces the vision that all students can learn and that learning is lifelong. Each skill documented is another success in the student's growing sense of capability. Each portfolio validated by an employer confirms that school does prepare students well. Harold Hodgkinson (1987) summarized our task in a report to the state: "We must change from a model that picks winners to one that will create winners." []

¹Richard Hulsart, consultant from the Colorado Department of Education, was helpful in assisting us with initial planning. He continues to head the employability portfolio project in Colorado.

²H. Hodgkinson, (1987). *Michigan: The State and Its Educational System*. (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership, Inc.).

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