1

Informing Everyone

Informing all involved in the creation of student portfolios and the conducting of student-led conferences is crucial to the eventual success of the undertaking. It is the first step in the process of implementing this type of conferencing (see Box 1.1). Before teachers can determine how they want to go about informing administrators, students, and parents about their plans, however, they need to understand these two strategies and know the theoretical basis for their power as educational tools. Knowing the reasons why these two strategies work together to help students learn, teachers are better prepared to explain to everyone concerned why they are using them. Teachers are also able to adjust and improve the process when necessary so that it will work with all students in their unique classrooms. Therefore, before we give ideas for how to involve students and parents in the process, we want to inform teachers about the "what" and "why" of student-led conferencing using showcase portfolios.
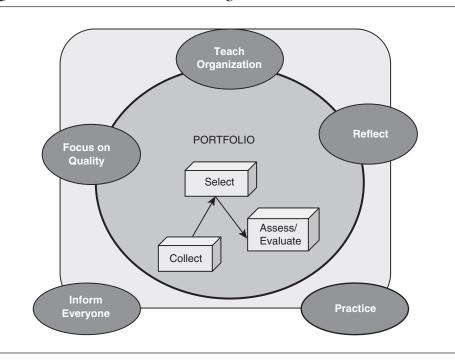

Box 1.1   The Process for Student-Led Conferencing

- Inform everyone
- Build portfolios
- Plan and prepare for conferences
- Hold conferences
- Reflect and celebrate

WHAT IS STUDENT-LED CONFERENCING?

Student-led conferencing is simply having students conduct formal conferences with their parents or guests to display their schoolwork as well as discuss their learning, educational goals, and strategies for meeting those goals. Such conferences are continuations of the classroom conversations about learning

Figure 1.1   Student-Led Conferencing

that take place between the teacher and the student throughout the year. Rick
Stiggins (2002) says of student-led conferences, "I regard this conference for-
mat to be the biggest breakthrough to happen in communicating about student
achievement in the past century" (p. 500). The reason he is such an advocate
is that student-led conferencing puts the students at the heart of the process so
that they have the opportunity to tell the story of their own achievement and
are held accountable for doing so.

Students need to have a collection of their work and reflections, a portfolio,
to conduct a meaningful conference, but the portfolio is only one step in the
larger process of implementing student-led conferencing (see Figure 1.1). The
conferences give meaning to the portfolio as well as the focus on quality work
and the reflection and organizational skills students will be learning. Portfolio
development is embedded in the preparation for the larger performance—the
student-led conference. These conferences offer the authentic outside audience
necessary for portfolios to be serious, real-world tasks, and they bring parents
into the assessment process.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF
STUDENT-LED CONFERENCING?

Encouraging more parental involvement in children's education is only one
of several important benefits of student-led conferencing (see Box 1.2). The
inclusion of parents in school assessments of learning is one of the standards

for assessment of reading and writing developed by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). In their rationale for this standard, the IRA and the NCTE (IRA/NCTE Joint Task Force on Assessment, 1994) assert that "in many schools, parents stand on the periphery of the school community, some feeling hopeless, helpless, and unwanted. Parents must become active participants in the assessment process" (p. 37). Involving parents in the assessment process "includes the use of communication and reporting procedures between school and home that enable parents to talk in productive ways with their children" about their learning (p. 38). Student-led conferences can be this type of parent-student communication because it gives parents a broader look at their child's learning, progress, and school experience.

Box 1.2   Benefits of Student-Led Conferencing

- Involve more parents
- Increase student motivation
- Meet state standards
- Improve student and teacher accountability
- Celebrate learning
- Make teaching more satisfying

All teachers realize that parental support is crucial if students are to succeed in school, and any effort we can expend to enhance that parent support will benefit all participants in the educational process. Student-led conferences are a relatively easy way to inform parents of student performance and encourage the home support the students need to improve and continue learning. These conferences get more parents into the school because they have been invited by their children to see the children perform. Parents, who don't traditionally come to parent-teacher conferences or open houses, will come to these conferences. One study (Tunistra, 2002) of four schools that implemented student-led conferences schoolwide found "parent participation [in conferences] never falling below 92% at any of the four schools" (p. 136). Cooperation between parents and teachers also increased because, as Tunistra says, "In the SLC format, the teacher becomes the advocate for the child, one who applauds the student's success and provides a support network for his/her climb to success. This format results in more positive parent-teacher interaction" (p. 137). Increasing cooperation with parents is an added benefit for teachers, too.

In addition to bringing parents into the school experience of the students in a positive way, student-led conferencing is motivating for students because it is *real* work. The process helps students develop skills necessary to be successful in the future. Preparing for and conducting conferences allow students to look at their own performance in the classroom, set goals and strategies for improving future work, organize a presentation about their learning,

carry out that presentation, and reflect on its effectiveness with the goal of improving future performance. For older students, this process is similar to interviews for college entrance, scholarships, and jobs and to job-performance review conferences with work supervisors. Students and parents must be shown the similarities between school conferences and future situations students will face. When parents understand this connection, they see that they are helping their children practice for some crucial adult performances, and the students have additional motivation for performing well. The authentic nature of student-led conferencing provides younger students with a relevant, real-world context and application for their learning. As an authentic task, student-led conferencing has the power to motivate students to do high-quality work with the added benefit of eliciting parent support for the student, the teacher, and the school.

Since all schools are working to meet higher student learning standards, it is important to discuss how student-led conferences can help in this effort. State standards in all content areas include requirements that students demonstrate knowledge in complex, real-world situations. Student-led conferences do this beautifully because the student must talk about and explain what they have learned to an authentic audience. Many conferences also include demonstrations of skills. For example, students might play a piece on a musical instrument, teach a minilesson, show and discuss a video of their participation in class activities or presentations, or read aloud.

An important area of standards that student-led conferencing addresses is communication skills. All state standards have requirements that students improve communication skills by learning to read, write, listen, and speak effectively. The process of preparing and sharing portfolios requires that students learn and practice their communication skills, thus improving their performance on state tests requiring these skills. For example, the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress report (as cited in Manzo, 1999) on what improved writing test scores said, "Students who save their class work in folders or compile portfolios scored higher than those who didn't" (p. 18).

In addition to writing tests, states have content area tests that students must pass. Long-term learning of content requires that students review on a regular basis. Going through work samples to select entries for portfolios and writing reflections on the samples are meaningful and regular reviews of content learning. Sharing and discussing the samples with a guest is yet another review of significant learning in a given course or grade. High school students have said that they did not need to study as much for exams once we started student-led conferences because they had reviewed the information so many times as they got portfolios ready and shared them. "But," you ask, "does this success in taking classroom tests carry over to success on high-stakes state tests?" Research on this question is just beginning, but the answer appears to be "Yes!" In Tunistra's (2002) study of student-led conferencing in four schools, she found that "all schools reported higher scores on state tests in math and reading" (p. 125).

WHY DO STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES USING SHOWCASE PORTFOLIOS WORK?

Portfolios and student-led conferences are so powerful in the classroom because they are applications of the theories involved in the educational research on the use of authentic tasks and assessment as tools to enhance student motivation and learning. Authentic tasks are real-world activities that people perform in the seven spheres of their lives:

- Personal potential and wellness
- Learning
- Meaningful and fulfilling pursuits
- Physical and cultural environment
- Group and community memberships
- Work and productive endeavors
- Close and significant relationships (Spady, 1994)

Such authentic learning is often inspired by the use of real problems that require critical thinking and complex problem solving. Creating a portfolio and conducting a conference with parents are two authentic tasks that involve students in multiple problem-solving situations and can encourage as well as teach critical thinking skills.

What Do You Mean by *Authentic*?

Portfolios are authentic because they are used by adults to pursue professional and personal goals. Artists, models, architects, advertising agents, and even the kitchen specialist at the local hardware store have portfolios to illustrate their best work to future employers and clients. Programs such as the one at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (Willis, 1994) require educators studying for certification as principals to compile portfolios. Teachers and student teachers are also being asked to develop portfolios as part of their evaluations. A key component of the National Board certification process for teachers is the development of a portfolio (Barone, 2002) that includes entries and commentaries that require the teacher to reflect and connect the artifacts to the teaching standard they demonstrate. Even administrators are being asked to have professional portfolios. For example, as part of the evaluation process in Caldwell County Schools in North Carolina, principals are required to present their portfolios at their yearly evaluation with the superintendent.

Whether or not a portfolio is being required in the system, a teacher who is planning to implement portfolios in the classroom really needs to begin a professional portfolio as students are beginning their learning portfolios (see Resource B). If the teacher is developing a portfolio as students are doing so, the teacher will have a much better grasp of the process, problems, and rewards of the activity and therefore be able to model and facilitate the student process.

Portfolios are real documents in the adult world, and creating them can help students connect classroom activities to the world beyond school.

Creating portfolios only for a grade does not make them authentic. All adult professional portfolios are shared with someone for the purpose of showing what the portfolio creator can do. Student portfolios become authentic when they are used beyond the classroom. Student showcase portfolios created for a student-led conference can be used to apply for jobs, to gain admission to college, to validate exemption from college classes, or to qualify for scholarships. Universities such as Miami University of Ohio are having students use writing portfolios compiled during their senior year of high school as a way to test out of the introductory writing course at the university. These previous real-world uses are, however, available only to secondary students who are close to graduating. What can help make creating a student portfolio real for elementary and middle school students?

Currently, most student portfolios at all levels are still used only as a form of test to be handed in to the teacher or kept by the school system. When this happens, students do not own the document and are no more motivated to do well on the portfolio than they are on any school evaluation. Teachers have discovered that in cases like this, students just give them the same quality work they would have turned in before, but now they have collected all the "stuff" into a pile.

Bringing parents into the picture to view the portfolios in student-led conferences, however, automatically makes portfolios authentic for all students. As a sixteen-year-old stated, "Explaining my work to my father by showing my portfolio is the most authentic assessment possible!" The real value of portfolios as documents of authentic learning and quality work is that they can, when shared with an audience beyond the classroom, motivate students to do a better job than they might ordinarily have done. Like all of us, students are motivated by the relevance and significance of the tasks they are asked to do. A real-world task such as discussing learning and progress with a significant adult is naturally motivating and challenging for students. If we want to do something about the apathy that prevents learning in many classrooms, we should heed this connection between motivation and authentic student tasks. As W. Edwards Deming observed, "Intrinsic motivation is the engine for improvement. If it is kept alive and nourished, quality can and will occur. If it is killed, quality dies with it" (cited in Aguayo, 1990, p. 103).

Authentic tasks (see Box 1.3) such as student-led conferences using showcase portfolios can improve student motivation for class work and, therefore, raise the quality of that work—two goals all teachers have for their students. Not only do portfolios and student-led conferences allow for authentic work in the classroom, but they also allow for more authentic assessment and reporting of that work.

What Is an *Authentic Assessment?*

The term *assessment* is being used in education for everything, and the word *authentic* tends to be attached if a particular test is not the traditional pen-and-paper type. Current use of these two terms is often in error, however, because

> **Box 1.3**   Traits of Authentic Tasks
>
> - Are seen as purposeful by students
> - Are long-term in nature
> - Place students in real roles
> - Require the demonstration of significant performances
> - Facilitate high expectations and standards
> - Require the use of complex thinking processes
> - Allow for multiple and varied products
> - Provide for maximum student control and regulation
> - Provide opportunities for cooperation and collaboration
>   (Spady, 1994)

much of what is called assessment and authentic is neither. *Authentic assessment* is a term appropriate only for times when student learning is applied in a complex, real-world situation, and assessment is more than an event for a grade—it is a complex and long-term process. Authentic assessment is an activity to facilitate learning rather than just to measure it.

The root word, *assess,* means to sit beside. In other words, an assessment should be a mentoring process through which teachers sit with students, and together they look at where the student work falls in relation to set criteria to make plans for the next steps in reaching or exceeding the criteria. Assessment is an ongoing dialogue between the student and teacher, not a singular event. This is far from the present state of assessments that occur on a set date and do not get results back to teachers until the students have finished the school year. In these situations, there is no real ongoing conversation between the teacher and student based on the information they may have gotten from the test event. The difference between an assessment and a test, as one high school student explained very vividly, is that if assessment is "sit beside" then a test is "stand over."

A test is an evaluation intended to give information about what a student has learned at a certain checkpoint in time. As much as we would prefer to do assessment, we must also evaluate student learning because there are many people who need to know how students are doing. Portfolios can be used to gain information for assessment and evaluation, but teachers need to be clear about which they are doing at a given time. During the assessment process it is the feedback that the teacher gives to the student that is vital for improvement and learning. The assessment should be happening all along the way as students and teachers are working together. Thus, assessment is a tool for learning, not just a test of what was learned. Evaluation should happen at the end of the process to report student learning and progress toward goals and expectations. In carrying out the process of authentic assessment, teachers should ask four questions:

1. How are you doing now?

2. What do you need to work on to improve?

3. What strategies could you use to improve?

4. What have you learned and how can you use it beyond the classroom?

These four questions demonstrate the process that all of us go through in learning situations. We take stock of what we know, we decide what we need to know or do next to improve our performance, we plan strategies to improve, and we decide how we will use the information or skills we have acquired. If a written test is the only evaluation of student learning, the process of assessment never formally goes beyond the first question. Only students who are already motivated because they see some relevance to the learning activities in the class will ever go on to Questions 2 through 4. Most of our students are not able to apply this process to our classes. Consequently, we must help them internalize this process by practicing it through the way we assess their learning.

Portfolios, which are developed over a period of time and involve student self-assessment and teacher feedback, combined with student-led conferences have the potential to become authentic assessments that can encourage and teach the processes needed for students to carry the learning in the classroom far beyond the classroom into their adult lives. An additional assessment advantage to student-led conferencing is that it actively involves the parents or guests of the student in the process of assessment. In a student-led conference, the parents are sitting beside their child and discussing the learning demonstrated in the portfolio and the child's goals and plans for improvement.

HOW DO PORTFOLIOS AND STUDENT-LED CONFERENCING AFFECT TEACHING?

The use of portfolios and student-led conferences can not only improve student motivation, improve student learning, and change assessment practices but can also change teaching methods and, consequently, the whole learning environment in the classroom and school. The major change is that in compiling a portfolio and preparing for a parent conference, the students are the ones doing the actual work. They are beginning to take ownership of and responsibility for their learning, while the teacher plays the roles of guide and facilitator—roles educational reformers are encouraging teachers to assume. These roles insist that teachers help students discover the relevance of their learning, solve their individual learning problems, make personal decisions about their work, and develop the communication skills needed to discuss their learning.

A classroom where students take such an active part in the work is a different classroom from the one where the teacher is the giver of knowledge to passive students seated in neat rows of desks. As Barbara Barbour, a math teacher in Vermont, said, "Using portfolios has changed my approach to teaching math, and it has changed the way students learn. They're doing more creative work by problem solving, and they're excited by the process" (cited in Merina, 1993, p. 5). Portfolios used in student-led conferences move students and teachers toward more authentic work, learning, assessment, and, inevitably, instruction.

Such movement demonstrates the five standards of authentic instruction proposed by Newmann and Wehlage (1993) because the conferencing process requires the following:

1. Higher order thinking

2. Depth of knowledge

3. Connectedness to the world beyond the classroom

4. Substantive conversation—student and teacher talking within the classroom to learn and understand the substance of a subject

5. Social support for student achievement

Portfolios and student-led conferences demand higher order thinking and depth of knowledge because students have to organize, make decisions, explain and justify those decisions, and convey their content learning to an audience beyond the classroom. The conversations that take place between teacher and student, student and student, and student and parent offer social support for student achievement and help teachers be more effective in teaching content and encouraging all students to better use their minds.

Having students keep portfolios that will be shared with people beyond the classroom also makes teachers look at the type of work they are asking students to do. A portfolio full of "testlets," bubble sheets, and worksheets is not the type of authentic learning evidence that students can discuss in any length in a conference. As one teacher told us, "Collecting work to put in a portfolio has made me think about the work I assign. I am trying to make it more meaningful for students." Teachers in Tunistra's study (2002) said that "they plan lessons with more intent" (p. 126) because of the portfolios and conferences. Authentic portfolios that will be shared with someone who is important to the student lead the teacher and the student toward more authentic learning and class work.

In Tunistra's study (2002), teachers were very pleased with the impact of student-led conferencing: "No teacher voiced a desire to return to the traditional parent-teacher conference format" (p. 126). As explanation for their total support, they also reported that student work was more focused, students were having more academic success, and discipline in their classes was better. In fact, "all four schools reported a significant decline in discipline problems" (p. 126). Over 94% of students in these schools said that they now revise and edit their work, 90% of them set goals for themselves, and 76% say the goal setting made them better students (p. 126). Happier and more focused, successful students make for happier and more focused, successful teachers.

Another benefit of student-led conferencing is that it offers teachers an essential tool for differentiating instruction. The first step in differentiation is to know where the learner is. Because of the individual nature of a child's portfolio and the conversations needed between the teacher and students to do this type of work, the teacher will know the students much better. Once the teacher knows a child, the teacher is better able to adjust instruction and assessment to

meet a child's needs. Through the conferencing, parents also get to see their child's accomplishments and areas of challenge more clearly than if they only saw numbers or letters on a report card. The documents and the conference also allow all students, no matter their level of academic success, to communicate what they have learned. A showcase portfolio is, by definition, unique to the learner, and no two conferences are exactly alike, even if they cover the same talking points. These are indeed ways to help all children succeed and celebrate the successes they do have.

HOW DO I INFORM MY ADMINISTRATOR AND COLLEAGUES?

It is imperative that teachers let their supervisors and administrators know that they plan to do student-led conferencing before they inform anyone else. There are a number of logistics that must be worked out in conjunction with school administrators, including when and where the conferences will be done. Before trying anything innovative and outside traditional practice, we always spoke to our administrators to give them advance notice of questions parents might have as well as to be sure there were no system impediments to what we wanted to do. We always found administrators to be very supportive once they could see the benefits the new strategy would have for children's learning. As we often say, "'Tis better to involve the principal on the takeoff if you want him or her to be with you on the landing."

The best approach to talking to your principal and others is to point out the benefits student-led conferencing has for all concerned. Depending on your school, its school improvement goals, and the concerns of your principal, you can stress the areas that most apply. For example, if your school is trying to get more parent involvement, talk about how parents will come to these conferences and become much more positive about their child's education. Following are some aspects of student-led conferencing that you might share:

1. Student-led conferencing improves parent involvement by:
    - Giving parents a broader look at their child's learning and school experience.
    - Inviting parents to be part of the students' learning by celebrating success and helping students practice for adult interview situations.
    - Offering parents a positive reason to visit school.

2. Student-led conferencing improves student motivation by:
    - Giving students a real audience for their learning.
    - Asking students to do reflection, self-assessment, and goal setting.
    - Putting responsibility for learning in the students' hands.
    - Offering a relevant reason for doing quality work.

3. Student-led conferencing meets state standards by:
    - Allowing students to demonstrate learning in a complex, real-world situation.

- Helping students review content knowledge to remember it for later testing.
- Improving communication skills, such as speaking and listening.
- Encouraging critical and creative thinking.

4. Student-led conferencing holds students and teachers accountable by:
    - Requiring public evidence of what has been taught and learned.
    - Offering a benchmark for students and teachers as they work to complete curriculum requirements.
    - Documenting student learning and progress in portfolios.

5. Student-led conferencing is a celebration for all because it:
    - Lets students showcase what they have learned and can do.
    - Allows parents to applaud their child's hard work and success.
    - Brings students, parents, and teachers together in a positive way.
    - Gives everyone a sense of accomplishment.

Once you have convinced your administrator that student-led conferencing is a great idea for you to try, you can seal the deal by inviting the administrator to be a guest in your classroom as students work on their portfolios and prepare for their conferences. You should also be sure that your administrator is the guest for a conference conducted by one of your students. We believe that hearing a child explain his or her work, progress, goals, and learning is so powerful that any adult who is privileged to be the guest for a conference will wonder why we would do conferences any other way.

Informing colleagues may be much less difficult than informing administrators. If you are a member of a teaching team, you need to let them know what you are planning to do and why you have decided to do this. They need not join you in the effort, but you can invite them to do so if they would like to. Share the list of benefits given earlier and be sure that you also invite these colleagues to be guests for conferences. Seeing the conferences is a very powerful selling point. A skeptical colleague of a high school teacher who was implementing student-led conferences came into the school library during conferences and asked what all the parents were doing there. The teacher was busy greeting and facilitating and simply asked the teacher to watch for a few minutes. When the teacher later returned to her colleague, the woman had tears in her eyes. She said that it was beautiful to see sixteen-year-olds talking to their parents about their learning. And so it is! The conferences will make your point to your colleagues, so invite them to take part.

HOW DO I START WITH STUDENTS?

Getting started is always the hardest part. As one first- and second-grade teacher said, "The hardest part was just getting started. I've wanted to do this for a long time but never felt like I had the skills I needed. Finally, I decided to just do it!" This is exactly how it feels when you first try student-led conferencing. Because it is so different from the way we have been trained as teachers,

it often feels very messy. It's as if you are jumping off a cliff into an unknown, arms flailing and legs kicking, but don't worry. The excitement students get from having some control and say over their own learning will carry you through the rough patches. You have to have the faith that it will work. Even when we did not feel that we were really as prepared as we needed to be when parents and guests showed up for conferences, all went well. Our best advice for getting started is to get a friend, hold hands, take a deep breath, and jump off that cliff. We promise, you both will fly!

Once you have made the decision to begin and have determined some of the logistics for creating the portfolios and organizing for conferences (see Chapters 2 and 3), you need to inform students. Student preparation, elementary through high school, begins the first day of school, when students are told conferences will be part of the school year. You can give students the task prompt for conferences as a way of introduction (see Box 1.4).

Box 1.4   Student-Led Conferencing Task Prompt

Your task: You are a portfolio designer, who will collect, select, analyze, and organize samples of your class work to create a portfolio of your learning and then share it with your parents or guests at a student-led conference.

Students need to be informed about the reasons for conducting the conferences and the benefits of taking part. Some of the benefits for students include the following:

- For younger students, student-led conferences provide a chance to brag about and share good work, have some uninterrupted time with mom or dad, create an opportunity to practice communication and reading skills, and provide a chance to share school experiences.
- For middle school students, the conferences provide an opportunity to demonstrate growing maturity; a chance to talk to parents in an organized, formal, and nonconfrontational way; and a forum to share the range of their school activities and growing competence in content areas.
- For high school students, the conferences provide practice for future job, college, and scholarship interviews; an audience for their increasingly complex knowledge and skills in content areas; and a chance to visit with parents whom they may not see very much due to their own activities and job commitments.

Although younger students are very willing and excited about conferencing with their parents, middle school and high school students often approach this idea with mixed emotions. Because teenagers are trying to be adults, free of parental control, they may balk at the idea of leading a parent conference at first. They will, however, like the opportunity to please their parents by showing

what they are learning and can do. In preparing high school students for conferences, one teacher led them in a mantra to remind them of why they were having conferences and to get them psyched for the experience. They would chant, "We are doing this to prove that we are mature, organized, intelligent, and responsible adults!" It always worked, and students went into their conferences convinced of the value of holding them as well as their ability to do them well. Regardless of the age of students, they will all be anxious about whether or not they can conduct such a conference, so they will need to be assured from the beginning that class activities prepare them to do a great job when the conferences roll around.

It always helps to be able to show students what portfolios and conferencing looks like as you inform them, but it is not necessary. The first year a teacher has students create portfolios and conduct conferences, it is usually impossible to have models of student portfolios to show or veterans of conferences to share their experiences with a class. If a teacher has never seen a student portfolio, when students ask what a portfolio looks like, it is acceptable to answer that the class will figure it out together. The uncertainty of that may make some students and teachers uncomfortable, but it does have one advantage. It involves the students in the process from the beginning and demonstrates to them that learning is not something they alone are expected to do: Teachers have to try new things and learn as well. If what we are modeling for students is lifelong learning, it is good for students to see that we do not always have the answers for every question or the patterns of how something must be done. The greatest learning experiences are the ones where the door is open, where we do not have all the answers.

Who Are You and Why Are You Here?

The process of informing students and getting them started also involves setting an initial benchmark by which student progress can be measured throughout the year. Students need to know where they are at the beginning of the year, so they can set goals and be able to talk about their own progress when conferencing time arrives. Therefore, after students have been told they will be leading a conference with their parents where they will use a portfolio as evidence of their learning, they need to make an opening statement about who they are and what they hope to gain during the year's schooling. At the beginning of the school year, we always ask our students to answer two questions: Who are you and why are you here? Even the youngest students can introduce themselves with a self-portrait or a scripted answer to the questions. With really young children, there may only be the self-portrait, but this can be the basis for seeing development in the child's perceptions of the world, fine motor skills, and reading readiness. Older students can write reflective pieces or an essay to complete this assignment.

The students' answers to the question of who they are can also be used to create two of the first portfolio entries: the title page and the preface. It is important to begin the portfolio process early in the year, and a wonderful way to do this is to have students create personalized artifacts for their own portfolios.

This will help introduce them to the process of portfolios and start them thinking of the year's learning as something that belongs to them. First, they need to create a title page that might include a photograph from home or one that the teacher takes with a digital camera during the first week of school. This page could also include a drawing that a younger student does or a quote that an older student thinks is significant or representative of who he or she is. Another artifact, the preface, should be done early in the year as well. The preface is the author's statement introducing the author and the author's goals for the academic year. It might also include how the portfolio will help with these goals (see Boxes 1.5 and 1.6). Once students have a title page and a preface for their portfolios, the introduction to the concept of showcase portfolios is complete, and the students are well on their way to creating one. They also feel a sense of ownership for the portfolio that will motivate them to make it a quality document.

Box 1.5   Sample Preface From an Elementary Student Portfolio

I'm making a portfolio because I can keep track of my work. In my portfolio I want people to see my quality work. I also want people to see how I am doing in school.

Alice, fourth grader

Box 1.6   Sample High School Preface

The purpose of my portfolio is to combine, in one place, a collection of my best written work. As I add additional samples of my work, I hope to meet my goal.

The goal that I have set for myself this year is to improve the mechanics of my writing skills. Hopefully, as I make additions to my portfolio, these skills improve.

I have been taught in sports and other things that practice makes perfect. If I continually try to improve, then I hope to produce quality work. Quality is the commitment to continuous improvement. My writing should be better as the year goes on. This portfolio will show this.

John Grayson

The second question is very important for students to consider because it can lead to goal setting for the year or for the first marking period. Having students set some goals for themselves is preparation for conferences where they will be discussing their goals, strategies to reach those goals, and progress with their guests. They should set no more than three goals, and they should

also list a strategy to help them achieve each goal. These goals could be academic as well as behavioral, and they should be recorded on a card or form that the teacher keeps so that the goals can be reviewed at regular intervals.

Goal setting is a metacognitive process. Some students, often the strongest students, instinctively know how to set goals for themselves. In fact, research by Mountain (1998) showed that "from their earliest years our students seek to acquire or create what matters to them" and it is "these inherent drives that lead our children and young people to pursue personal goals." So our students do set goals for themselves, but not all reach their goals. Mountain reports "it is clear that for students to meet goals in meaningful ways they need encouragement, examples, guided experiences, and appropriate tools." We must offer the things needed for goal setting and success. Students will need to be taught how to set realistic goals with effective strategies (see Box 1.7 and Resource A for ideas). When introducing goal setting, the teacher must model the process. Think alouds, a strategy often used in the elementary grades to demonstrate how to think through a process, are very effective. The teacher begins by saying, "I want to set three goals for myself this year. One of my goals for the year is . . . " The teacher then says, "I've set this goal for myself because . . . " and "A strategy to help me meet my goal is . . . "

Box 1.7   How Teachers Can Facilitate Goal Setting

- Listen to students in order to become familiar with who they are, their inner "nudgings," and what makes them "tick."
- Think out loud with students.
- Demonstrate sincere caring about students' personal success with what matters to them.
- Model personal interest in goal setting by sharing some of your goals, your willingness to risk, what strategies you use, and how you responded to failures or "blips."
- Use positive, optimistic language. (Mountain, 1998)

Because a goal is useless without practical strategies to reach it, students will need to have at least one strategy per goal. Students often do not know what is meant by "strategy." In fact, many students who struggle in school don't even know that there are strategies for learning. It has been a mystery of the universe for them, something that some students were born knowing how to do. Therefore, the teacher will need to discuss what "strategy" means and help students find strategies that are appropriate to their identified goals. For example, if a student's goal is to improve test scores, simply studying harder might not be an appropriate or specific enough strategy. This would be particularly true if that student has lost the textbook the class is using and never does the reading. Perhaps finding the book is the first strategy that needs to be employed.

Once students have drawn or written their beginning statement, goals, and the strategies they plan to use to reach goals, the teacher should collect these

pieces. Because discussions of progress throughout the year will be anchored to these documents, they need to be saved for use later. As students prepare for conferences, they will need to refer to their goals and strategies to measure and discuss their progress (see samples in Resource A). Some students will not realize the significance of these papers to the process of the upcoming conferences and may misplace them, leaving the students unprepared when conference time comes. To ensure students have their papers for the conferences, collect them from the students when they are finished. After you collect these papers, students are ready to begin their year of learning.

HOW DO I INFORM PARENTS?

Just like the students, parents need to know about the upcoming conference plans and specific dates as soon in the year as possible. They also need to know the rationale for the conference and the logistics for participating. An excellent time to introduce parents to the concepts of portfolios and conferencing is at the first parent meeting or open house of the school year. In schools where portfolios and student-led conferencing are a schoolwide activity, the fall open house can be planned specifically for this purpose. But if the open house comes after the first month of school or will offer the teacher only a few minutes with parents, the best way to inform parents is to invite them to an orientation meeting early in the school year. In such a meeting, the teacher would do the following:

- Explain that the conference will be a time of sharing and celebration of the work done during the grading period.
- Explain that the child, not the teacher, will be in charge of the conference.
- Describe the process to be used in preparing for the conference, developing the portfolios, and completing the conference.
- Set aside two dates during the school year for conferences at school and tell parents so that they can mark their calendars.
- Let parents know they should allow twenty minutes for the conferences (most conferences actually last longer than the allotted time because the parents are interested and the conversation goes beyond the specific items the students prepare to share).
- Explain that parents can schedule separate teacher-parent conferences to deal with specific problems if desired or needed.
- Share the purposes and powerful benefits of student-led conferencing—for example, student-led conferences provide students with the opportunity to do the following:
  - Become responsible for their own work
  - Learn organizational skills
  - Be involved in the assessment of their learning
  - Improve their communication skills
  - Include their parents in their learning experiences
  - Learn to set and achieve realistic goals
  - Demonstrate progress toward meeting state standards

- Emphasize how parents can support their children by attending the conference (their participation allows the students to practice real-world skills with a supportive audience who has the child's best interest at heart).
- Explain that parents will be asked to help document the conference with a reflection.
- Answer questions and address parent concerns.

You should also provide a parent handout with the main points of the presentation and details of the dates, times, and places of the upcoming conferences. Be sure to invite administrators to this meeting because their support will be important in the success of the conferences. Their presence at the meeting also signals to parents that these conferences are an approved activity.

McTighe (1997) offers an analogy that is a clear way of explaining to parents what a portfolio is: "If a test or a quiz represents a snapshot (a picture of learning at a specific moment) then a portfolio is more like a photo album—a collection of pictures showing growth over time" (p. 12). Parents understand that a photo album of their child's year would be much richer than one or two pictures. They will be delighted to know that they will be receiving such a collection at the end of the school year.

Parents, especially of elementary students, need to understand that implementing portfolios in a classroom changes some of the normal practices that parents associate with school. One thing that differs from traditional practice is that students will not be bringing home great quantities of completed school-work on a daily or even weekly basis. The teacher needs to explain to parents that student work must remain in the classroom so that students can have work to select from when assembling their portfolios. Initially, this may concern some parents who use the daily work their children bring home to follow their children's school progress. The teacher, therefore, needs to create a system for saving and sending student work home. Some teachers, for example, take time each Friday to go through the student work and decide what pieces need to be kept for the portfolio. The rest of the work is sent home each week. During the first parent meeting, the teacher needs to assure parents that teacher-parent communication will be accomplished many ways—through weekly newsletters, notes, student-parent letters, and other alternative communication methods, including student-led conferencing.

Because student-led conferencing differs from traditional parent-teacher conferences, parents often fear that unless they meet with their child's teacher, they will not know what is going on at school. As teachers inform parents about student-led conferencing, they need to stress that, although the child is in charge of the conference, parents will have a better understanding of their child's strengths and weaknesses by hearing from their child firsthand and by seeing work in the portfolio. Parents also need to know that they can request a conference with the teacher at another time if necessary.

Prior to the parent meeting, the teacher may want to ask someone to videotape the meeting. The videotape can then be copied and made available for parents who are unable to attend. These videotapes will enable the teacher to be consistent with information that he or she shares with parents and are

invaluable tools to inform parents of new students who join the class later in the school year. Best of all, this tape captures your initial enthusiasm and energy for the project.

Parents can also be informed with a letter home, but this is not as effective as discussion at a meeting. If a letter is sent, it needs to go out before artifact collection begins. To ensure that parents get such a letter, it is best to have students get these signed and returned to the teacher for filing (see Boxes 1.8 and 1.9).

Because showcase portfolios and student-led conferencing may be totally new concepts to parents, parents need to be informed early and kept abreast of the process throughout the year. Chances are there is not one method that will suffice to reach all parents, so teachers and schools have to try many ways to ensure parental knowledge, understanding, and support of the process. Having students and parents understand why they are taking part in the process is essential to making the conferencing experience beneficial to all. Therefore, teachers must inform, educate, and involve students and parents in the process repeatedly during the year. Once parents attend their first student-led conference with their child, they will completely understand and support the effort. We have even had parents of previous students volunteer to be guests for current students whose parents can't attend conferences. These volunteers believe in the process and enjoy it so much that they want to do it again to support others.

Box 1.8   Sample Letter for Elementary Parents

Dear Parents,

This year your child will be keeping a portfolio. The portfolio supplements the report card and is a way for students, parents, and teachers to see a child's progress throughout the school year.

Just as artists, investment brokers, architects, and other professionals use portfolios to showcase their best work, your child will use the portfolios to showcase his or her best schoolwork. With my assistance, every child will choose work samples to place in the portfolio as the year progresses. These samples will come from all areas of the curriculum. Students will also include work samples they think are special. Since the children will need to keep samples through the year, we will not send home daily work.

All student work will be kept in a works-in-progress (WIP) folder in the classroom. You are welcome to come and look through your child's WIP folder at any time. The students and I will keep you informed of what is happening in the classroom with a weekly letter.

This year the students will learn how to evaluate their own work and how to set goals for future growth. Together, your child and I will meet on a regular basis and discuss these evaluations and goals. Part of the student-led conference will be to share their own evaluations of their work as well as their goals for improvement with you. Your child will bring his or her portfolio contents home at the end of the school year.

If you have questions about the portfolios we will be keeping, please call me. I will be happy to answer them.

Sincerely,
Mrs. Barnett

Box 1.9   Sample Letter for Secondary Parents

Dear Parents,

As the new school year begins, I want to welcome you to our 180-day adventure in learning. This year we will be doing a number of things differently in an effort to improve the learning that takes place and the quality of the work the students produce. I am very excited about the opportunity to work with you and your child and anxious to begin.

Attached you will find a syllabus for the year, which gives an overview of the content and procedures we will follow. Please sign and return the signature page that follows to indicate that you have read the material.

Two major additions to the year's work will be student portfolios and student-led conferences. A week before the end of the first and third marking periods, we will be having student-led parent conferences to keep you informed of your child's progress in the course. Your child will conduct the conference using a showcase portfolio to document coursework and learning progress. The portfolios will be a collection of the student's best work, and no work will go into the portfolio until it meets quality standards at an Excellent or Acceptable level. Students will be given the information, practice, and help necessary to get their work to an Acceptable level, but they must take advantage of these opportunities by attending class regularly and keeping up with assignments. When needed, I will also offer extra help and work time before and after school. Since research clearly shows that parental involvement and support are important to a student's success, I sincerely hope that you will support my efforts to provide the best possible learning experience for students by encouraging your son or daughter to take responsibility for his or her learning and by attending the conferences.

On the evenings of August 31 and September 2, I will be having parent information meetings to discuss the student portfolios and student-led conferencing. The meetings will begin at 7:00 p.m. in the lower part of the high school library. I do hope you will be able to attend one of these meetings. If you have any questions or wish to talk to me about the upcoming year, please use the comments portion of the attached signature page to respond or to request an appointment. I will be in touch with you as quickly as possible. I am looking forward to getting to know your son or daughter as the year progresses and hope to see you at the parent information meeting.

Sincerely,
Mrs. Benson