

How Have You Grown?

Final Reflection Portfolios Help 8th Grade Students Define Where They've Been, Where They Are, and Where They'll Go

By Jessica Siso

"Success is a journey, not a destination." –Arthur Ashe

When children enter Benchmark, they are typically low in confidence after having struggled in their previous schools. When these same children leave Benchmark years later, they have become strong self-advocates who have learned to take control of their own learning. To anyone on the outside, these significant transformations are quite astounding, and yet an understanding of how far they have come is often not readily apparent to the students in the midst of these transformations. Also, the students may not want to recall their earliest time at Benchmark because of the feelings of frustration or inadequacy it may reignite.

For these reasons, the Language Arts Final Reflection Portfolio project was created almost 20 years ago as a final project for soon-to-be Benchmark graduates. The project, albeit simple in its premise, is probably one of the most challenging assignments given to the students because it requires deep reflection about who they are as people and learners. "For many of them getting started [on the project] is the hard part, and we have to remind them that it's okay to unlock the past because that's not how it is anymore and that's not who you are now," Middle School Teacher Megan Wonderland said.

The assignment—to create a portfolio that reflects on one's growth (socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically) and develops a vision for the future—requires multiple steps and actually begins early in the school year. "In September, we have the 8th graders first put together a Directions Portfolio to help them reflect on where they are academically and what they want to accomplish during their last year at Benchmark," said Head of Middle School Eleanor Gensemer. "The Directions Portfolio contains parent and mentor interview sheets, an assessment of the student's current approaches to learning (strengths and challenges), and S.M.A.R.T. goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely) for the year." Fast forward to the end of the school year, and this Directions Portfolio then serves as a launching point to help the students pull together their final reflections of themselves both as students and people.



Cassie Paschos discusses the various sections of her portfolio during the 8th Grade Portfolio Sharing and Reception on June 15.

Where I've Been

The first section of the Language Arts Final Reflection Portfolio asks students to write an essay documenting their growth as students, including information obtained by conducting interviews with at least four teachers and mentors. "Interviewing former teachers and mentors is very important because the students are not always aware of their own changes and are often surprised to hear how much these adults say that they have grown," Eleanor said. "It can be a hard process because it brings back a lot of early feelings, but then they [the students] see how much they have changed, and it ends up being very positive."

Middle School Teacher Jesse North said that it's during this part of the process that students have the opportunity to see work they had completed in previous years. "Seeing the hard evidence of an early writing sample

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—Dan Santoleri '13

can be such a momentous event for a student,” she said. “Not only are they often astonished at what their writing used to look like, but letting them see those old work samples is great because it really shows them tangible evidence of how they have changed and grown. The students often know the areas they need to work on, but do not as readily know or reflect upon their strengths, so seeing this growth is key.”

For alumnus Dan Santoleri '13, this section of the portfolio did just that. “It [the portfolio] made me recognize all the struggles that I came into Benchmark with, and showed me that I now know how to overcome so many of my weaknesses,” he said. “It also was very eye-opening to me because I am very hard on myself and couldn't see all the strengths I had. I needed the help of teachers [whom I interviewed] to confirm the transformation of some of my past weaknesses that had now become strengths.”

Recent graduate Harry Smith had a similar experience in completing this section of his portfolio. Having come to Benchmark in 2nd grade, he had the opportunity to look back at his progress over a number of years and said that he was “surprised” to see how much of a self-advocate he had become. “The reflectivity part of the portfolio was a big challenge to me, but I feel proud of how far I've come and how aware I am of my strengths and roadblocks, as well as the strategies to use to get past them [the roadblocks],” he said.

This section also has the students reflect on their own attitudes and feelings about school and give advice based on what they know now. The advice ranges from academic (“it's not always easy, but once you get through the grunt work, it works out for the better”) to social (“...you have to let your teachers get to know you for real, or else they will not be able to help”). Though many students reflect upon having to push through tough times, they often are able to recognize that getting to “the other side” was well worth having to overcome the struggles. “You will be required to take charge of your learning, but you will learn how to learn and learn so

much about yourself in the process,” alumnus Steven (Max) Marino '13 said in his reflection.

Where I Am

After reflecting upon their past, students are then asked to reflect on where they are now as a learner by writing an essay explaining their learning style, as well as compiling a detailed catalogue of strategies learned at Benchmark that might be helpful to them in the future. “This part [of the portfolio] is like an owner's manual to be able to refer back to when they are stressed and panicking,” Megan said.

Though all parts of the portfolio serve an important purpose, this section is one of the most helpful to students in ensuring that before they leave Benchmark they know who they are as learners and can use the appropriate “tools in their toolbox” to get over any hurdle or situation they may face.

“Completing this section has helped me realize that I am ready to move on [to my next school] because I now know academically what works for me and what doesn't,” recent graduate Carly Hottenstein said. “I know that I will definitely use my chart of strategies in my next school, and I feel more confident knowing that I have it to reference.”

Making a detailed list of the wide range of cognitive strategies and conceptual frameworks that will assist them across academic and social settings is intense, but is an exercise that is beneficial long-term. In fact, since the chart lists the name of the strategy, when to use it, why to use it, and how to use it, the chart is frequently utilized long after students leave Benchmark. “I have definitely used my portfolio since leaving Benchmark,” said alumnus Julie Pozzuolo '15. “I use it to look back on my strategy catalogue, and I still use a lot of strategies I learned at Benchmark.”



Ryan Blackwell (left) and Carly Hottenstein (right) proudly show off their final portfolios with Middle School Teacher Megan Wonderland.

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Dan agreed. “I have used my portfolio many times [since leaving Benchmark],” he said. “I actually use it at the beginning of every school year so that I can remind myself of all my tools that I have to use for the school year, and I also pull it out during big papers and projects.”

Where I’m Heading

Fear of the unknown is common for all people, but can be especially difficult for Benchmark students who have grown to find comfort in the teachers, mentors, and fellow classmates who have experienced the same struggles and successes. Therefore, the final part of the portfolio has students look towards the future with confidence and excitement by completing a personal mission statement and description of where they see themselves in one year.

“We know the way these students are now and that they have the skills they need to succeed, but it’s really beneficial for them to see the progress that they have made so that they feel confident going into their next school,” Eleanor said.

By encouraging students to look forward, it helps them to continue taking ownership of their academic, social, and emotional success by having a plan and working towards a goal. “I will never quit, I will always give 110% in everything I do, and I will take responsibility for my actions,” one student wrote in his mission statement. “I am willing to push myself to grow more and more.”

Though the final project serves as an “owner’s manual” for each student as a learner and can be very useful to graduates who have moved onto other schools, Megan said that the process of the project is almost as important as the outcome. “The process of putting it together has so much value,” she said. “They’ve all made so much progress and this portfolio project shows them not only how far they have come, but where they have the potential to go as well. It’s meant to help give a final boost of confidence before they move on.”

For Julie, it is a project that she looks back on fondly. “Putting my portfolio together took a long time, but it was fun to look back at the past and see how much I grew as a person and a learner,” she said. “Also, I liked how I got to put to use all of the strategies I had learned throughout my time at Benchmark in one project.”

Sharing & Reflecting

After completing their Language Arts Final Reflection Portfolios, the soon-to-be-graduates have the opportunity to share their projects with their classmates, families, and former teachers at the 8th Grade Portfolio Sharing and Reception prior to graduation. Here, they allow



Cecilia Haubold (right) and her mother, Denise Glennon, during the 8th Grade Portfolio Sharing and Reception on June 15.

the Benchmark community to read their portfolios, and the students have the opportunity to talk through the process of putting it together and discussing how they have grown.

Though each student’s personal reflection ends up being unique, certain areas of growth tend to be recurrent among the graduates: increased confidence, improved reading and writing, better organizational skills, better concentration, knowing one’s learning style and strategies to utilize in order to be successful in the classroom and in life. These areas of growth create self-advocates who emerge exceptionally well-prepared for the next stage of their education after graduating from Benchmark.

“The whole thing was a little overwhelming, but I’m proud of the end product,” Carly said. “Even though it was a lot of work, without making the portfolio I would have felt a lot more nervous about moving on [to another school].”

Building motivation, confidence, and engagement—a pillar of a Benchmark education—is what it’s all about long-term, and the Language Arts Final Reflection Portfolio does just that for students who are about to move on. “I still remember how emotional and eye-opening it was putting together my final portfolio,” Dan said. “It keeps the legacy of Benchmark with students long after they graduated so that they can then reflect back on it without hesitation. Personally, I think that it was the best thing that I did during my time at Benchmark.” 