

Portfolio and Capstone Guidebook

Asia Society – Partnership for Global Learning
Capstone Work Group, January 2015

The information for the capstone project was created by the Graduation Guidelines Capstone Work Group. For a list of the members of the work group or for a copy of the [Capstone and Portfolio Guidebook](#), click [here](#).

Plan for Success

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1. Assess School Readiness

Before implementing a portfolio and/or capstone assessment system, the administration and faculty should undertake an assessment of their readiness. This is not meant to be a process schools and districts use to determine whether or not they can build out quality portfolios or capstone projects, rather it is intended to help them identify the assets and capacity they already bring to the effort and where they need to build additional capacity. Some questions the school may consider include:

- Do we have a clearly defined curriculum or set of outcomes for students currently? If not, what would it take for us to define those graduation outcomes (competencies)?
- Do we have mechanisms in place to assist with implementation of a portfolio or capstone experience in our school (e.g. an advisory program, senior seminar course, CTE curriculum design that already incorporates capstones or portfolios, and/or common planning time for teachers to collaborate)?
- Can we communicate the need for such an approach to our local constituents (students, teachers, parents, community members)?
- Do we have an existing committee or entity that can help guide the implementation of such an approach (e.g. shared decision making team, curriculum committee, etc.)?
- What expertise does your staff currently have and what new expertise might they need to develop? (e.g. assessment literacy, collaborative assessment of student work, providing students' targeted feedback, etc.)
- Do we have a clear purpose for how this will benefit our students?
- Do we have high, and realistic, expectations in place for students that will help prepare them to succeed at a portfolio or capstone experience?

To assist schools in determining their readiness, a [Readiness Checklist](#) (page 2) has been created to highlight some of the major factors to consider prior to the design phase.

The initial work conducted by a school or district helps make the case for why implementing portfolio and/or capstone projects makes sense in your local community. The strongest approaches will attend to the academic, professional, and entrepreneurial competencies for students, as well as encouraging students to develop expertise in an area of deep interest. All approaches encourage and require a high degree of collaboration and coordination among faculty and staff.

Readiness Checklist

Directions: Use this tool to self-assess your school’s readiness to support the successful implementation of capstones. For each indicator, rate the level of implementation. After you have assessed your school readiness, review each domain and identify one or two priorities to address.

| Domain | Indicator | Level of Readiness | | | | Priorities |
|------------------|--|--------------------|------------|---------|----------|------------|
| | | Not Present | Developing | Present | Strength | |
| Leadership | Experienced and effective educators are leading the initiative. | | | | | |
| | Schools/district leadership has high degree of assessment literacy and expertise (assessment design, performance assessment, rubrics and scoring). | | | | | |
| | A high-functioning distributed leadership model exists; including formal teacher leader roles/responsibilities and collaborative committee structures. | | | | | |
| | District fully supports the implementation of this initiative in terms of policy, funding, time and expertise. | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Vision & Mission | A shared vision and commitment to this initiative exists among all faculty, students and community members | | | | | |
| | Through a collaborative process, the school/district has developed a strategy or plan to address 21st century skills (as defined by the Graduation Guidelines) | | | | | |
| | The school utilizes a collaborative design or feedback process with community members for other initiatives (e.g., World Café, design thinking) or obtains feedback through frequent surveys. | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Culture | College and post-secondary readiness is the expectation for all students. | | | | | |
| | Faculty engages in systematic, collaborative reflection to ensure continuous improvement of their practice and student outcomes. | | | | | |
| | Norms and protocols guide the way faculty meet and interact with one another. | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Infra-structure | Structures that support close adult/student relationships while promoting personal, academic and social growth (e.g. Advisory, faculty mentors, etc.) | | | | | |
| | Site-based autonomy allows the school to make decisions about how to use time (scheduling), staffing and curriculum. | | | | | |
| | The master schedule is designed to allow for flexible grouping of students and interdisciplinary or project-based learning. | | | | | |
| | Regularly scheduled time for teacher collaboration is part of the schedule (common plan time, release time, PD time). | | | | | |
| | Robust structures exist that allow for shared decision-making and faculty ownership of school-based management and innovation | | | | | |

| Domain | Indicator | Level of Readiness | | | | Priorities |
|--------|---------------------------------|--------------------|------------|---------|----------|------------|
| | | Not Present | Developing | Present | Strength | |
| | (e.g. school improvement team). | | | | | |

2. Address the Needs of Students and Staff

To ensure success, it is important to consider the needs of *all* your learners and the adults who will guide this new approach. It is important to consider what additional supports will be needed for students with special needs, English language learners, or students who are substantially ahead or behind grade level. In the implementation of a portfolio or capstone, plan for interventions and/or enrichment in order to account for diverse learners.

Support staff and teachers bring an essential knowledge base that should be represented in the initial design phase and later feedback process. Ask them specifically to articulate accommodations and modifications that may be necessary for students to demonstrate their proficiency/competency or to create their presentations. When several students share similar needs, build in specific accommodations or modifications into the overall process. Teachers in Special Education, English Language Development, or Gifted and talented education can offer ideas for supporting a particular student or population as well as direct collaboration in the classroom. More generally, allowing students to personalize their demonstration of learning will help accommodate different ability levels and needs.

In addition to determining the developmental needs of students, it is important to think about the diverse needs of the instructional staff. In schools where teachers are accustomed to collaborative learning and decision making, you can draw on ways of working that are already established. There may be some additional agreements or steps. Agreeing on priorities for student learning can bring up differences as well as commonalities that might otherwise not have been surfaced. Acknowledging the significance for the school in making this decision is important as you provide necessary time and support.

One criteria you might evaluate is the tolerance level for ambiguity within your school. There will be a certain degree of uncertainty? doubt? to start this process. Often when there are many initiatives within a school, there can be a high degree of frustration on the part of teachers. It is important to understand how this initiative fits with the goals and outcomes for the school. Start small. Instead of developing a comprehensive set of competencies and rubrics in the first year, you may need to pilot a small program, getting some experience for a year before taking the leap to the full blown process. This might include piloting the new approach with a small cohort of students or building in a formal presentation or defense component into an existing course. This may also come in the form of implementing “passion projects,” where students get to select a topic of their choice around a topic in which they have great interest or “passion” and conduct research with a formal display of learning.

Implementation of portfolios and/or capstones may also require the development of new skills and understanding within the faculty and staff. First, all staff will need to understand and embrace the rationale and role for competency-based assessment in an evaluation system. Then they need to understand their role as mentors or advisors in the process. They provide the necessary support system students will need to plan, curate, and present their body of work to demonstrate competence. Additionally, teachers need to understand the competencies and outcomes of the process to be able to guide students to that final demonstration.

To be sufficiently prepared in terms of mindset, practicalities and skills, teachers need time and structures to collaborate to accomplish a variety of tasks including (but not limited to):

- Writing/revising the competencies/outcomes for students
- Writing/revising the rubrics that will be used to assess student work
- Examining student work collaboratively to ensure inter-rater reliability
- Creating the learning experiences for students (e.g., performance assessments, projects, etc.) for students to produce work for the portfolio
- Planning the structure/format of the final student defense
- Recruiting and training people to sit on review panels
- Sharing best practice strategies regarding mentoring students, monitoring student progress, providing students' feedback, and ensuring rigor throughout the process

Underlying everything is the power of agreed upon clear and consistent expectations for demonstrating learning and competencies.

3. Develop an Action Plan and Timeline

The action plan and timeline provide a transparent way to communicate with all constituents about the goals, expected outcomes, and pacing of implementation. Various templates can be used to provide all the relevant information. The action plan includes several basic elements:

- **Long term goal(s)** (What do you hope to achieve in 3 – 5 years?)
- **End of year SMART goals** (What do you hope to achieve by the end of this year, directionally towards the long-term goals?)
- **Quantitative and qualitative measures** (How will we know if success was achieved by the end of the year?)
- **Action steps** (What will we do to help us achieve the goal(s)?)
- **Inputs** (What resources are necessary?)
- **Responsible parties and timelines** (Who is responsible to ensure the task is completed and by what date?)

4. Create the Conditions for Success

Build in time for consistent faculty collaboration, as well as time in the master schedule for students to interact with staff (either as a planned course or frequent advisory time).. Dedicated time is also necessary to allow for students to defend their portfolio or capstone project. Neither teachers nor students must be expected to do all the work of the portfolio or capstone on their own time or completely outside of the school day.

Engage Community in Identifying Vision and Purpose. Developing a common vision and purpose for the portfolio or capstone is critical for long-term success and sustainability. Ensuring that all teachers, students, and parents understand the purpose and potential for these approaches is built over time.

Evans (1996)¹ explains the importance of having focus and clarity, stating:

An innovation, particularly one that requires radical change on the part of those who implement it, is unlikely to succeed without its being focused and clear, that is, without all key participants' knowing its "why, what and how" – why the reform is being pursued, what it actually consists of, and how it ranks relative to other projects in which they may be involved.

Through the use of public meetings, student or parent forums, and the collaborative design process, schools can engage their constituents in the design and purpose setting of the portfolio and/or capstone. If your community has not historically been transparent about the design of courses or defining student outcomes, this serves as a perfect opportunity to do so. The design of the portfolio or capstone can serve as a concrete way for communities to express their values and emphasize the type of skills and dispositions they want their students to demonstrate. The more transparent the purpose of portfolios and capstones is, the easier it will be to communicate to everyone about what it means for students and adults alike. When the vision for what teaching and learning should look like in these structures is commonly held among faculty, it leads to certainty, effective communication, and consistent expectations for implementation.

Schools that engage their local constituents in the design and implementation of portfolios and/or capstones tend to experience greater success than those that do not. By involving the community, schools are able to cultivate strong advocates in the community such as parents, business and civic groups. These external supporters can provide the school leverage to move further into implementation and occasionally leads to new resources and opportunities for students and teachers.

Upfront, schools need to develop a clear set of expectations and a rationale, which should be shared with students, teachers, parents, and the community in a timely and clear manner through the process. Each faculty and staff member needs to be able to communicate internally and externally about the significance of the portfolios and capstones, including the benefit for students. One tool that a school may opt to create is a stakeholder map or communication plan. This plan would segment the different stakeholders into affinity groups and outline, "Who needs to know," "what they need to know", and "when they need to know." A simple plan of this kind will help ensure all parties are kept in the loop and in a timely fashion.

Develop a Distributed Leadership Approach. As with any school program change, the role of school leadership is a critical factor in the implementation of portfolios and capstones. The School administrator or administration team should take a formal leadership role in order to ensure that policies and school operations, such as schedules, planning time, human capital commitment, and overall support of the work are in place. The main function that school leaders play in this process is to establish clear expectations and outcomes for the work, by providing a clear rationale for, and expected outcomes from, the implementation of portfolios and/or capstones. In doing so, the

¹ Evans, R. (1996). *The human side of school change: Reform, resistance, and the real-life problems of innovation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

school leaders serve as the lead advocate and supporter for the work. Leaders that nurture individual agency and build collective capacity will see greater success in school change, in general. School leaders should continually communicate the importance of the portfolio or capstone throughout the implementation process, both in words and actions. Beyond the school and district administration, it is also important to enlist the involvement of your Board of Education in the process. Board members may be involved in the design, implementation (serving on defense committees or mentoring students), and external communication about the new approach.

While the school leader serves as the lead advocate, he or she must also foster a distributed leadership stance to ensure sustainability. Much of the work of implementing a portfolio or capstone experience rests on teachers' shoulders. Supporting teachers as leaders to make informed decisions about the design and implementation of the portfolio or capstone is critical to their ownership and buy-in to the process. Teachers must be empowered to make decisions at the classroom and school level regarding the process and have a formal role in evaluating the implementation process. Likewise, local stakeholders such as parents and other community members can be engaged to help determine the content of the system and have a designated role in the process (e.g. serve on defense committees or help advise students on a project).

The more involved students are in the design and implementation, the more likely they are to understand the intent and components of the process. They should: be involved in the design of the approach; help inform incoming students about the process; and serve on defense committees.

School Level Autonomies. Providing schools with site-based autonomies for decisions around staffing (who, when, and how many people to hire), finances (how allocations are spent across the program), curriculum and instruction (what is taught and how), and scheduling (daily and yearly schedules) allows them to design and implement a portfolio and capstone process that is flexible and comprehensive. For example, if the school can flex its schedule to allow for a late starting time once a month, teachers could collaborate or review student work together. When there is flexibility in content and curriculum, school communities have the ability to create a capstone course or embed project-based learning that is specifically designed for students to develop products as solid evidence for their portfolios.

Competing Initiatives - which may range from district and state mandates to internal priorities set at the school level - may impede the successful implementation of portfolios and/or capstones. When possible, align the implementation of portfolio and capstone to an existing district priority or goal.. There are meaningful connections to be made between the state's Postsecondary Workforce Readiness definition, Colorado Model Content Standards, the ICAP, and even the state's model system for teacher evaluation. Finding commonalities between the various initiatives will be an important step in ensuring that this is not just "one more thing," but perhaps the thing that ties everything else together.