Preface

This book is a result of our evolution as teachers and our passion for helping teachers motivate students to learn what is essential to their success beyond school. Like educators across the country, we faced the dilemma of figuring out how to enhance student learning, move toward more authentic assessment of that learning, and report the progress of students more effectively to parents. Our own struggle to do these things led us to two strategies that, in combination, have the power to transform classrooms into the types of learning communities necessary to address some of the largest concerns of American education: student motivation, higher standards for learning, and parent involvement.

WHAT'S NEW IN THIS EDITION

Since the first publication of this book in 1999, we have continued to conduct professional development on how to implement student-led conferences using showcase portfolios. We knew that the first edition was a recipe for implementing these two strategies in classrooms and schools, and we were correct. Teachers repeatedly tell us that they went home and did student-led conferences with their students. They excitedly relay that the conferences were wonderful and that they cannot imagine doing conferences the old way ever again. Staff developers, education professors, and curriculum and instruction directors in districts also endorse the original book as usable, practical, and supportive of their efforts to train teachers to use student-led conferencing.

As high-stakes testing and a national push toward higher standards occurred, and as we used the book as a resource in teacher professional development, we saw places that we wanted to elaborate, connections we wanted to make to emerging standards, and areas we thought we could clarify. We are glad to have this opportunity to do so. This revised edition includes the following improvements:

- More explanation of how student-led conferencing and showcase portfolios meet the higher standards that are now in place in all states
- A big picture of the student-led conferencing process that more clearly illustrates how portfolios are only part of the whole task
- Ways to inform administrators and policymakers about the benefits of student-led conferencing

- Specific ways for teachers to begin student portfolios with their classes
- A reorganization of Chapter 2 to align it with the steps in the process of implementing student-led conferencing and creating portfolios
- Timelines for teachers to help them plan for conferences and portfolios
- Additional black-line masters for teachers to use
- An expanded and updated list of references
- Information about digital portfolios
- Current research on the positive impact of student-led conferencing on student learning

We feel this edition builds on the positive features of the first edition and will be even more useable to promote student-led conferencing for all students.

RATIONALE

Many books are available about portfolios, and others deal with student-involved or student-led conferencing. None, however, really discuss in detail how to create the portfolios and use them as tools in conferences led by students. A portfolio is an assessment document of student learning, but the conference is the assessment performance that truly demonstrates student learning. Because conferences give the portfolio authenticity, and the portfolio is a necessity in a conference to illustrate the student's learning and progress toward educational goals, it is the marriage of the two strategies that makes a comprehensive assessment. Our book discusses how to implement both. We believe that creating portfolios without the purpose of sharing them with an authentic audience is too much work with too little reward for students and teachers. Perhaps that is why systems that merely collect student portfolios for grades are moving away from using portfolio assessment. Our discussion of portfolios is, therefore, embedded in the process for implementing student-led conferences.

By explaining the processes for creating student showcase portfolios to be used in conducting student-led conferences, this book enables teachers and schools to implement these practices. It is a cookbook of recipes for improving student motivation, raising standards of quality in the classroom, and involving parents in the processes of educating their children. It is intended primarily for teachers—both those presently teaching and those learning the profession in teacher training programs. Because the strategies should be a part of any school's ongoing staff development, however, this book is invaluable reading for staff developers, curriculum and instruction directors, building administrators, parents, and school board members in districts involved in school improvement.

We have blended elementary, middle, and high school examples and strategies throughout the book because we feel that the strength of this process is that it is essentially the same at all grade levels and can be the skeleton that aligns portfolio assessment throughout a school system. The processes and strategies in this book are classroom tested. We have used them with our own students, elementary and secondary, and have conducted workshops since

1992 for teachers who have used them successfully in grades K–12. The text includes our experiences as well as those of numerous other educators who have implemented student-led conferencing using showcase portfolios.

Since the first edition, standards and high-stakes testing have become the norm in American schools. Because of this, we have seen an increase in demand for training in how to implement student-led conferencing. The reasons for this are many, and all support that having students conduct conferences with parents or caring adults is becoming one of the major tools for moving toward standards-based schools.

One reason for this increase in student-led conferencing involves the issue of reporting children's progress toward standards using methods that are not only fact-based but also loaded with active verbs, methods that require students to apply the factual knowledge in real-world situations. As districts change report cards to reflect the standards that students must meet, they realize that parents have a difficult time understanding standards-based ratings of 1 to 4 or a report card that does not have traditional grades on it. This should be no surprise because education has only given parents one vocabulary to use when talking to their children's teachers, and it is grades. Parents want answers to three basic questions when they talk to their children's teachers: "Do you like my child?" "Will my child be ready for what is next?" and "How is my child doing now?" When parents ask these questions, the answers they have learned to expect are references to the child's grades.

We cannot tear out this weight-bearing wall of grades without putting in something in its place to hold up the ceiling. Student-led conferencing can help reassure parents that their child is learning, is doing well, and is preparing for "what is next." If the portfolio artifacts are aligned with the appropriate standards for that child's grade level and content, the parents begin to understand the standards by seeing the work. After having a conference with their child, some parents even forgot to ask for the report card they were to pick up after the conference. Guskey and Bailey (2001) made the following point regarding the conferences:

> Student-led conferences represent a highly effective way to communicate directly and authentically with parents. When students direct the reporting process, information is communicated in a form everyone can understand and use. Reviewing the portfolio during the conference becomes a learning experience for everyone involved. As such, student-led conferences are an especially important part of the comprehensive reporting system. (pp. 190–191)

Student-led conferencing can help districts move to more standards-based grading and reporting. It can be one of the major things that holds up the ceiling while we remodel education.

Student-led conferencing also offers a way for students to demonstrate their knowledge by presenting, communicating in various ways to diverse audiences, showing what they know, and applying content to a real-world situation. It is difficult to give students multiple opportunities to practice and perfect the activities

represented by the verbs in the standards. Creating a showcase portfolio and presenting it to demonstrate learning is one way to do this and is, by its very nature, a standards-based activity.

OVERVIEW

The superstructure on which this book is built is the process of implementing student-led conferencing using showcase portfolios. The order of the chapters follows this process:

- Informing everyone
- Building student portfolios
- Planning and preparing
- Conferencing
- Reflecting and celebrating

Within the chapters, material is organized to answer questions teachers ask most frequently in our workshops.

Chapter 1, "Informing Everyone," explores the theoretical basis for the power of showcase portfolios when they are part of student-led conferences and offers evidence of the success of using these combined strategies with students. This chapter connects the processes shared later in the book to sound, research-based rationale on assessment and evaluation of student learning, work, and progress. It also includes evidence of the positive effects that using student-led conferencing has on student learning, teachers, and schools. Then the chapter discusses ways for teachers to inform administrators, parents, and students of the process for conferencing and constructing student portfolios.

Chapter 2, "Building Student Portfolios," defines "portfolio" and describes different types of portfolios that may be used to conference. The chapter then goes into detailed discussion of the process for creating showcase portfolios in classrooms:

- Collecting necessary work samples
- Selecting work to be included in the portfolios
- Reflecting on the learning these samples represent

Included in this discussion are ways to focus students on quality work and teach them the habit of reflection. Because we recommend one particular type of portfolio for student-led conferences, we offer numerous suggestions for possible contents for K–12 showcase portfolios in various curriculum areas.

In Chapter 3, "Planning and Preparing Student-Led Conferences," we examine the process for getting ready for student-led conferences. The chapter discusses strategies to help students prepare, numerous ways to invite and involve parents, and tips to deal with the logistics of holding conferences in various school configurations. It also includes tips for successful conferences.

Conducting the actual conferences is discussed in Chapter 4, "Conducting Conferencing." This chapter offers snapshots of conferences at different schools

and different grade levels. We give examples of how conferences are conducted in a single classroom as well as in an entire school. The chapter also answers "Yes, but what if . . . ?" questions teachers and administrators have about implementing student-led conferencing using showcase portfolios.

In Chapter 5, "Reflecting and Celebrating," we discuss ways to have everyone involved reflect on the process with an eye toward improving it next time. The chapter also includes the voices of teachers, students, and parents as they reflect on conferences they have seen, conducted, or been part of.

The final chapter, "Improving Student Learning: The Evidence," gives some of the statistical and anecdotal proof of the impact of student-led conferencing on student learning and school success in meeting standards requirements. It relates the experiences and improvements in student performance in three schools that implemented student-led conferencing. The chapter also offers tips and suggestions to others from teachers in these schools who have used these strategies.

The resources offer additional help for teachers. Resource A contains sample forms that can be used in the process of creating portfolios and conducting conferences. Resource B discusses various types of portfolios, including electronic portfolios. It also talks about teachers creating their own professional portfolios, which we feel is essential if a teacher is to help students with their showcase portfolios. Finally, the reference section presents a list of works cited in the text and other sources that offer more information about many of the topics included in the book.

Our purpose in writing this book is to share the methods of implementing two powerful tools for improving student learning so that teachers can use showcase portfolios and student-led conferencing with their students, no matter what grade level or content area they teach. In the effort to improve schools, researchers and theorists have offered educators numerous ideas and programs but rarely have they given clear and practical processes for turning these theories into practice. These two strategies do just that, and we know that they work—for teachers, for parents, and, most important, for students. Our hope is that this book finds its way into the hands of many teachers who will use it to implement showcase portfolios and student-led conferencing in their classrooms so that these practices become a regular part of how schools do business.