

## Solving the Assessment Puzzle: A Perspective from Dr. Roger Farr

I was fortunate enough to hear Dr. Roger Farr (Indiana University) speak several years ago at a conference at SDSU. When he was finished speaking, I wanted to cheer! This is a gentleman who helped develop the Metropolitan Achievement Test as well as other standardized assessment tools. He's obviously been converted to using more authentic and performance based assessments! He has been honored for his outstanding lifetime contributions to the teaching of reading. He's in the IRA Reading Hall of Fame. He is a passionate proponent of more authentic and kid friendly assessment and about his belief in the power of portfolios and performance assessment. He is currently the program author of Steck-Vaughn's Think Alongs™: Comprehending as You Read series and senior author of Harcourt School Publishers *Signatures* and *Collections*. Some of my comments below about assessment, portfolios and conferencing were generated from my reading, from experience, and from listening to educators like Roger Farr. Hope you find some insight here.

During his lecture, Dr. Farr enthusiastically demonstrated how easy it is to put the pieces of the "assessment puzzle" together.

The first piece of the assessment puzzle takes a look at purpose. Is assessment for the benefit of the bureaucrats or is it intended to measure student performance and inform instruction? My response to this question is closely aligned with Roger Farr's impassioned plea to throw out the labels and think about children for a change: What is good for children?

The second piece of the puzzle asks the following three questions: What goes into a portfolio? Who puts it there? How is it looked at? The answers are found in "Roger's Basic Rules for Portfolios."

The third piece of Farr's assessment puzzle clearly outlines the basic contents of every student portfolio.

The final piece of the puzzle falls into place with the development of showcase portfolios. Dr. Farr described three types of showcase portfolios, their contents, and intended audience. The first is known as a "pass-on" portfolio, housed in a manila folder, and includes the reading/writing logs, student/teacher notes, and three things that the student selects to tell the next year's teacher about himself/herself as a reader/communicator. It is important to remember that the "pass-on" portfolio is a *springboard for the next year's working portfolio*.

Product assessment portfolios, also known as administrative portfolios, are created by teachers for the purpose of gathering and showing evidence, particularly in the cases of students whose test scores do not match their performance. These portfolios emphasize the goals of instruction and include a variety of sample items that are selected, dated, and annotated by the teacher. A teacher summary statement should also be included. Dr. Farr pointed out that this type of assessment is usually limited to 10-20% of a class population, and that it is not necessary for every child.

The third type of showcase portfolio, the remembrance portfolio, involves parents

and emphasizes the home/school connection. It highlights what the teacher thinks is important and provides a look at a child's development over time. Dr. Farr suggested that children give these carefully wrapped portfolios to their parents in a ceremony at school and then store them right beside the family photo album.

As a proponent and early pioneer of portfolio assessment and student-led conferences at my school, my initial response to Dr. Farr's presentation was a feeling of confirmation and validation for my personal philosophy about focusing on what works for children. I applaud Dr. Farr's enthusiastic efforts to reform and restructure the way we look at a child's progress and performance in school.

My second reaction was one of admiration for an esteemed educator, one who has moved from the dark ages of designing multiple choice tests to the enlightened age of advocating authentic assessment. This listener looked beyond the theatrics to find the man who truly cares about preserving the dignity of children and illuminating their gifts. I share and embrace his philosophy of assessment:

"Honor them for what they can do  
and not destroy them for what they cannot."