

CONTINUOUS PROGRESS SCHOOLS SEE THE "WHOLE CHILD"

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It has been called many names: Continuous Progress Format, Advancement Based on Competency (ABC), Continuous Progress Schools, and Continuous Progress Education. The idea of "Continuous Progress" refers to academic and developmental growth of students in a multi-age program. Students learn new materials as they are ready, regardless of their age, and teachers help them advance as far as they are able. The students progress at their own pace and begin each new year where they left off the year before. Since a Continuous Progress classroom has students working at various levels, each student must take responsibility for his or her own learning (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, n.d.).

Continuous Progress Schools are everywhere throughout the United States. In each school the format may look a little different but the same foundations are in place. Some common elements in most Continuous Progress Schools are Personalized Education Plans, flexibility and fluidity within grouping, and a sense of "community" within the school. Some Continuous Progress Schools have a special emphasis or theme that runs throughout the curriculum. An important feature of all Continuous Progress Schools is Parent-Student-Teacher "buy-in." As a team, the teacher, student, and parent agree on the curriculum and support one another. The team believes in the system at hand and will strive for success.

At New Augusta-South in Indiana, elective enrollment is the process by which students apply for admission from within the enrollment area. Since it is not a neighborhood school (i.e. if you live nearby, you attend the school), the school has a diverse ethnic and socioeconomic population. The 557-strong student body is 73% minority, speaking more than 23 native languages.

This school loops teachers with students for two years and cross-collaborates with the middle schools. Personalized Education Plans are in place for each and every student. Teachers, students and parents develop these. Portfolios are the main form of assessment (New Augusta Public Academy South, n.d.).

In Edina, Minnesota there are six elementary schools. Two of them, Highlands Elementary and Countryside Elementary, are Continuous Progress Schools. These two schools serve approximately 16% of the elementary population. At Highlands, the program components include: continuity (teachers stay with same students over a span of time), multi-aged groups, parent involvement, cooperative learning, process of learning (process, as well as product, is valued), and curriculum. The schools claim to success is the parent involvement and the highly qualified staff. Portfolios are used at both of these schools (Edina Public Schools, n.d.).

At Lake George Elementary in Lake George, New York there is yet another Continuous Progress School. This school,

which began in 1971, has won various awards. These include but are not limited to being recognized nationally by the United States Department of Education as a school of Excellence, 1985-86; Blue Ribbon School of Excellence, 1991-92, most recently named by the Institute for Human Resource Development as the BEST School of the Year for 1995-96 and in 2002 and 2003 recognized as one of the New York State's most improved schools in the areas of ELA 4 and Math 4 results. Their program looks similar to the previous schools, multi-age, self-directed learners, but with an emphasis on Language Arts. Portfolios are used in this school as well (About Our School, n.d.).

In Concrete, Washington, on the other side of the U.S., a Continuous Progress School is prospering. In this small rural town, students eagerly learn at their own pace at "family-style" tables. Attendance has risen from 89% to 93% in the last six years. The staff is caring and the community is supportive. The basic goal of Concrete Elementary is to nurture the diversity and growth of children's knowledge by removing artificial barriers. The Washington Office of State Superintendent of Public Instruction has named Concrete Elementary as a School for the 21st Century. Portfolios assess how a student is progressing, not a standards-based test (Jones, 2001).

Why are these schools doing so well? A school's success is measured by student progress and usually a student's progress is measured by standardized tests. Continuous Progress Schools, and other types of schools as well, are trying something different. In most Continuous Progress

Schools, portfolios are the mode of assessment. Portfolios are nothing new but are gaining momentum in the assessment world, as high-stakes testing becomes a looming obstacle. A Portfolio is a collection of the students' work over time and it may include but are not limited to documents showing the students' best work, drafts, self-assessments, teacher input and parents' assessments. A portfolio is non-competitive and shows progress at the student's own level. Portfolios may be used for evaluation of a students abilities and progress. Other types of assessment such as performance assessments, exhibitions, and observation scales can compliment portfolios. A variety of assessments are best in seeing the "whole child." Portfolios though, can be very thorough and all encompassing if used appropriately. The population of ethnic-minority and language minority students is already at a disadvantage, and when you throw in high-stakes testing, their academic future looks even more daunting. "The real challenge comes in selecting or developing a combination of assessments that work together as part of a comprehensive assessment system to assess all students equitably within the school community" (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1997). Teachers who have experienced working with portfolios report great benefits. They allow the teacher to assess children's individual learning styles, aides in communication between students and parents, and helps to fulfill professional requirements of school accountability while feeling that intentional teaching and learning is taking place. The planning, collecting, storing and presenting of

information in a child's portfolio is time-consuming, but the teachers who have a system in place report that in the long run the assessment is more meaningful and equitable to each and every student (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, n.d.).

Continuous Progress Schools and portfolios go hand in hand. In a multiage classroom where every student is learning at his or her own pace, portfolios simplify the assessment process. Portfolios are very unique to the learner and since children in a Continuous Progress School are responsible for their own learning, the portfolios become more meaningful to the student who is collecting and designing the portfolio. Each student feels worth and is given an equitable chance at proving that learning has taken place. In education today, assessment is key to ensuring that students are learning and developing academically. Concrete Elementary School, as in most Continuous Progress Schools, is taking assessment very seriously. "Portfolios travel with each student, so each teacher knows the progress being made. This assessment process emphasizes the teacher's responsibility to share and interpret information for the child and parents. Accountability is high and individualized" (Jones, paragraph 19). In this new era of high-stakes testing, cookie-cutter programs, and non-equitable education systems, seeing the "whole child" is essential in supporting our children as individuals and fostering a prosperous society.

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