



# Contents of the kit

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <b>Getting started</b> .....   | 4  |
| <b>I. Taking stock: The realities and limitations of traditional marking and reporting</b> ..... | 5  |
| <b>Activity 1:</b> A call for honest answers .....   | 5  |
| Consider your middle school's assessment and reporting program .....                             | 6  |
| <b>Activity 2:</b> The purpose of reports .....  | 7  |
| Opinions of others on assessment and testing .....   | 8  |
| <b>Activity 3:</b> Evaluation process .....  | 9  |
| 'Enhancing the evaluation process' .....   | 10 |
| Guidelines for developing classroom tests .....  | 11 |
| <b>Activity 4:</b> Is the carrots-and-stick shtick valid?.....                                   | 12 |
| 'Time to quit using the carrot-and-stick shtick?' .....  | 13 |
| How do we stand? .....   | 14 |
| <b>II. Building a body of beliefs about assessing student progress</b> .....                     | 15 |
| <b>Activity 1:</b> Alternate views on assessment .....   | 15 |
| 'Assessment and evaluation that promote learning' .....  | 16 |
| Some assessment terms defined .....  | 17 |
| <b>Activity 2:</b> Thoughts about assessment .....   | 18 |
| Belief statements: The evaluation process in the middle years classroom .....                    | 19 |
| <b>Activity 3:</b> Self-evaluation .....   | 21 |
| Self-evaluation test.....  | 22 |
| <b>Activity 4:</b> Skill testers .....   | 23 |
| Top ten skills desired by Fortune 500 companies .....  | 24 |
| <b>III. Alternative assessment strategies</b> .....  | 25 |
| <b>Activity 1:</b> Improving student reports and assignments.....                                | 25 |
| Ways to evaluate student performance.....  | 26 |
| Making written tests thought-provoking .....   | 27 |
| <b>Activity 2:</b> Assessing group work.....   | 29 |
| Reading the class's level of achievement .....   | 30 |
| Jeopardy-style testing.....  | 31 |
| Collaborative test taking .....  | 32 |
| <b>Activity 3:</b> Assessment other than academic achievement? .....                             | 33 |
| 'A narrative description of achievement' .....   | 34 |
| <b>IV. Portfolios: The new essential</b> .....   | 35 |
| <b>Activity 1:</b> Portfolios and assessment.....  | 35 |
| 'The four S's of assessment' .....   | 36 |
| <b>Activity 2:</b> Discovering the essentials of the portfolio process .....                     | 38 |
| Planning my mini portfolio unit .....  | 39 |
| <b>Activity 3:</b> Developing and using portfolios .....   | 40 |
| Planning outline for a product or performance project .....                                      | 41 |
| <b>Activity 4:</b> Evaluating portfolios .....   | 46 |
| Portfolio assessment tools .....   | 47 |
| <b>Activity 5:</b> Informing parents .....   | 50 |
| <b>Activity 6:</b> A personal professional portfolio .....                                       | 51 |
| <b>V. Plans for improvement</b> .....  | 52 |
| <b>Resources for school-based professional development</b> .....                                 | 54 |



## Getting started

**W**e believe it is past time to face the realities about traditional assessment practices and consider how they conflict with the middle school concept. Until we alter these means of evaluating, assessing and reporting, we cannot fully implement the kind of educational programs called for by our knowledge of young adolescents and the principles of learning.

This kit-in-a-book provides a meaningful, serious professional development experience for a team or study group that wants to examine its marking and assessment practices in order to make improvements – and do this all on its own time and at its own pace without requiring resource persons. While the directions in the kit assume it is being used by a team or study group, this kit can easily be adapted for use by an individual or by an entire faculty committed to focusing its professional development efforts on this age-old problem that clearly needs to be revisited and to initiate the use of portfolios.

Everything needed to complete the activities and tasks is provided in this resource. You will, however, need to make copies of some items at the time of their use so each member of the team or group will have one. For a team, many of the tasks can be conducted during those common planning periods devoted to professional development or curriculum planning. Some of the tasks call for trying out various assessment strategies with one or more classes

Each activity is made up of three Rs: *Read and react* includes some basic information on a tool or technique; *Action research* includes a directions for implementing the activity that will provide practice or application of the tool or technique; *Reflect* includes some way to measure your success in using the activity.

The kit is divided into five modules:

**Module I:** Several activities and tasks that bring into focus the limitations of, flaws in and negative aspects of assessment and reporting.

**Module II:** Identifying positive understandings and developing a philosophy of assessing student progress will lead to making changes more in keeping with the middle school concept.

**Module III:** Students are tested regularly, numerical test scores are averaged, homework may be factored in and a letter mark is assigned against expected outcomes. There must be a better way to assess students than this?

**Module IV:** The portfolio could definitely be labelled 'the new essential'. Its value in making the student a student of their own learning and assuming responsibility for that learning is highly significant.

**Module V:** It is essential to keep a record of the responses to the various tasks for later reflection and use in this culminating module. We suggest using a portfolio or journal conscientiously headed with the specific task, activity and module. There is unquestioned merit in the practice of putting ideas and conclusions in writing – sometimes we don't know exactly what we think until we see what we say.



# Module I

## Taking stock: The realities and limitations of traditional marking and reporting

### Activity 1

#### Read and react:

##### A call for honest answers

Stephen Bober, a middle school teacher and parent of a middle school child, writing in the *Journal of the New England League of Middle Schools* (Autumn, 2000), reflected on the limitations of report cards. He shares some of his thoughts in the excerpt on the next page.

Read Bober's thoughts on the following page aloud. Can everyone identify with the author's musings? Following a discussion among team members, prepare a statement that captures the group's reactions.

#### Action research:

##### Answer honestly

The list of questions on page 6, *Consider your middle school's assessment and reporting practices*, will be referred to in the following tasks. All teachers should have a copy of the questions so they can read and refer back to them.

1. As a team or study group, go through the 12 questions and give a relatively quick yes or no answer to each. Note the number of yes answers in comparison to the number of no answers. Since at least the first nine questions identify what are certainly desirable ends, does this ratio of yes to no lead to serious questions about the effectiveness of common assessment and reporting practices? Prepare a single sentence summarising the group's conclusions about the general effectiveness of current practices.
2. Locate a copy of the school's charter, vision statement or other generally accepted expressions of the school's objectives as found, perhaps, in the student handbook. Place this statement next to a copy of the school's report template and compare the two. Reconsider questions 5 and 6 as you do this. Are the goals expressed in the narrative statement reflected in evidence included on the report card? Agree on a conclusion reached after making this comparison and write it down.

#### Reflect:

##### Start a portfolio/journal

Decide on a way to maintain a functional record of your professional learning team's discussions and ideas and their application. Each member of the team should have a personal portfolio or journal to reflect on each of the activities. The team should also keep a portfolio to record the outcomes from the *Read and react* and *Action research* sections of the activities. In the team portfolio record the group's reaction statements from *Read and react* and write your conclusions from the above *Action research* questions.

Question 12 is a difficult one to face. Certainly educators never intentionally set out to teach some youngsters that they are dumb; but isn't that the lesson the lower 10 to 20% of students, those whose marks consistently are Cs, Ds and Es, inevitably learn? Think about this troubling possibility and discuss it among yourselves, especially relating it to what you know about human growth and development at this stage of life. Put your thoughts into your personal portfolio/journal.



I see the world from the perspective of a middle school teacher, but I am also a parent. Occasionally those two distinct lenses bring a blurry subject into focus. When my daughter was in middle school, I received her report card in the mail. Examining it carefully, I asked myself, 'What does this document tell me about my daughter? Is there anything here that helps me or my daughter understand what she has done, what she has learned, or what comes next in her learning career?' The report card presented a list of subject areas and accompanying letter grades representing 'performance.' It offered some data on effort and conduct along with a few generic comments, but it was left to me to give

meaning to any of the material. I became painfully aware that this report card (and all the middle school report cards that had preceded it) told me virtually nothing meaningful about my daughter's school experiences. More troubling still was the realisation that the parents of my students were getting essentially the same input from my school's report cards and would likely have the same feeling of emptiness, if asked, 'What does this document tell you about your child?' I had never felt comfortable with report cards, but now I was beginning to understand the problem.

– Stephen Bober

## **Consider your middle school's assessment and reporting program**

1. Does it provide helpful diagnostic information for students? for parents?
2. Does it relate achievement to effort? to potential?
3. Does it incorporate self-evaluation?
4. Does it incorporate an opportunity for specific goal setting?
5. Does it provide information on students' status in developing desirable behavioural traits?
6. Does it assess all of a school's stated goals and objectives?
7. Does it provide information that will help in making curriculum decisions?
8. Does it provide guidance for teachers in choosing instructional practices?
9. Does it provide specific information on how students are mastering communication and problem-solving skills?
10. Does it provide information that will help in making decisions about grouping and subject selection?
11. Does it encourage students to cheat?
12. Does it reinforce the low self-concepts that plague many young adolescents? (In effect, teach some students that they are dumb?)