Marble Hill High School for International Studies

AT A GLANCE

Founded
2002

Grades Served
9 - 12

Borough, District
Bronx, 10

Neighborhood
Marble Hill

Total Students
440

Admissions Policy
Limited Screened

Co-located
Yes

Demographics
Asian 9.77%
Black 26.82%
Hispanic 56.36%
White 5.91%
Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander 1.14%

Free or Reduced Price Lunch
>80%

English Language Learners
31.36%

Special Education
6.14%

Attendance
93.9%

Graduating Senior

"I think the [portfolio] process is a great thing. I've been looking for jobs and when I go on interviews I can speak about myself and my accomplishments with confidence. I've had to do this every year – two times a year- since I've come to MHSIS, so I'm prepared. The portfolio process prepares you."

-Sarah Bamba

MISSION The mission of Marble Hill School for International Studies is to develop in each student the necessary skills to acquire and apply knowledge. Students will be provided with a social, emotional, and physical environment that is nurturing, supportive, intellectually challenging, and conducive to learning. Students will be empowered to become self-directed, life-long learners inspired by their personal quest for understanding of themselves and the global society in which they live.

NYC Department of Education
Carmen Fariña, Chancellor

The Marble Hill School for International Studies: Background

The Marble Hill School for International Studies was founded in 2002. Kirsten Larson, a founding teacher, became the principal when the founding principal retired in 2007. Because of her experience as a founding teacher at the school, Ms. Larson keeps a teacher perspective at the forefront of her decision-making. She maintains this focus by committing to teach every semester. In her time as principal she has taught step, cooking, and art. Her two Assistant Principals, Ms. Wanda Dingman and Mr. Paul Parris, also spend significant time in the classroom, each teaching one class per semester. In addition, each administrative team member is responsible for one grade. They get to know the students on this grade level very well, and collaborate closely with their teachers. This practice helps to emphasize the commonalities of the work of administration and teachers. It gives all MHSIS staff members the sense that their goals are aligned and they are working towards the same vision.

The Portfolio Experience

Overview

MHSIS has used a program of portfolio presentations as part of their assessment system since the school first opened its doors. The rationale behind this program is to provide multiple means for students to speak meaningfully about what they've learned. Portfolios assess students' course content knowledge, as well as their presentation skills.

Each student completes and presents a portfolio twice a year in ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades. In twelfth grade students complete one winter portfolio and one Senior Exit Binder. For each course, teachers develop three projects a semester. Students complete each project, and then choose one from each course to present in their portfolio. In some cases teachers choose which project their students will present.

After each student completes a presentation and receives their grade, the school files the portfolio. By maintaining hard-copies of portfolios, the school builds a repository of work for each student that it keeps for the duration of the time the student is enrolled. Students often draw from this to provide sample work when applying for programs or scholarships. When students graduate, they are given their entire file, including seven portfolios and one Senior Exit Binder.

Guidelines

For each portfolio project, the teacher writes a set of guidelines for evaluators to use during the student presentations. Guidelines follow a standardized format that is well-known by all teachers and students. The format includes information about the project, reflection questions, course content questions, semester review prompts, and a list of possible correct responses. There is a standard set

Portfolio Schedule

Ninth Grade:
Portfolio Presentations in *January* and *June*

- Humanities
- Integrated Algebra or Geometry
- English/ ESL
- Environmental Science
- Foreign Language (Japanese or Italian)

Tenth Grade:
Portfolio Presentations in *January* and *June*

- Humanities
- Geometry or Algebra 2/ Trigonometry
- English/ ESL
- Living Environment
- Foreign Language Year 2 (Japanese or Italian)

Eleventh Grade:
Portfolio Presentations in *January* and *June*

- U.S. History
- Math course (varies depending on student's Regents scores)
- U.S. Literature/ A.P. English
- Chemistry/ A.P. Biology/ or Living Environment Prep (depending on student's Regents scores)
- Foreign Language Year 3 (Japanese or Italian)

Twelfth Grade:
Portfolio Presentations in *January*

- Government and Economics
- Math course (varies depending on student's Regents scores)
- English/ A.P. English
- Chemistry/ Physics/ Anatomy/ A.P. Biology/ or Living Environment Prep (depending on student's Regents scores)
- Foreign Language Year 4 (Japanese or Italian)
- College Readiness
- Electives and/or College Now

Senior Exit Binder in *June*

of reflection questions that can be used in all guidelines, but teachers are encouraged to write a few of their own. Teachers write the course content questions for each project. Ms. Larson reviews each set of guidelines to check for clarity and appropriate rigor before they are distributed to evaluators as shared Google documents

Presentations

For portfolio presentations, students are usually paired with teachers or administrators at random, who serve as evaluators. At times the pairing is intentional; students are strategically paired with an ESL or SPED teacher when necessary. Students do not know in advance who their evaluator will be. During presentations, students take about ten minutes to present each course project and answer questions about it. Students choose the order of the projects to present. The entire portfolio presentation lasts about one hour. Evaluators typically pull up the guidelines on an iPad, and work off of the document to ask questions and assess responses.

Scoring

Portfolios count for 10% of each student's final grade per course. They receive an overall score out of 100, comprised of one score for each category of questions, preparedness of materials, professionalism, and fluency (defined as ease and confidence in subject matter and its presentation). Scores are based on a rubric that is standardized across all courses and grades and embedded in the Portfolio Evaluation Sheet (see artifact below). Evaluators enter scores on each student's portfolio sheet. Portfolio sheets are given to students' teachers so that they can figure the scores into students' final grades.

Scheduling

In order to account for each student's portfolio presentation, the staff at MHSIS must schedule 450 one-hour sessions twice a year. The school's testing coordinator handles all initial scheduling, using a spreadsheet to track each student's portfolio date, time, and evaluator. Each teacher is given a schedule of all of the portfolios they will be evaluating in advance, and the testing coordinator works to ensure that teachers are not scheduled beyond the maximum time allowed for teaching each day. Evaluators and/or students may re-schedule if necessary, at the evaluator's discretion.

Administration handles the school-wide schedule for portfolios. Typically, 6-8 days are scheduled in January for the process, and 6 days are scheduled in June. When students are not presenting their portfolios, they are taking Regents exams or engaged in instruction. In order to avoid students missing out on any one course for many days in a row, the school has worked out the following instructional schedule for each portfolio day: on days 1 – 2, periods 1 and 2 meet as scheduled, on days 3 – 4, periods 3 and 4 meet as scheduled, on days 5 – 6, periods 5 and 6 meet as scheduled.

Portfolio Evaluation Sheet

Senior Exit Binders

Senior Exit Binders are due in June of Senior Year. They take the place of portfolio presentations. Senior Exit Binders include:

- *Student transcript*
- *Resume*
  - *Objective*
  - *Education*
  - *Extra-curricular*
  - *Awards/ achievements*
- *Letters of recommendation*
- *College acceptance letters*
- *College/ career plan*
- *Written reflection on the college application process*
- *Research paper from 12th grade English course*

Senior Exit Project Evaluation Sheet

Senior Exit Project Questions

[Guidelines- Algebra I]

[Guidelines – Japanese]

[Guidelines – ELA]

Evolution of Portfolios at MSHIS

Although key elements of the portfolio system, such as how they are developed, presented, and scored, have remained the same over the past twelve years, the system has evolved to become more efficient and responsive to student and staff needs. Initially, guidelines for each portfolio project were submitted for approval in hard copy form. Once approved, copies were made and distributed to all staff members who would be evaluators. This was done at a staff meeting where all teachers presented their projects. Over time, MHSIS did away with all of the hard copies, and now all guidelines are created and maintained via Google documents. All staff members have access to each set.

Because of this update, there is no longer need for the whole-staff meeting to present projects and guidelines. Now, evaluators simply pull up the guidelines for each project and read through them to prepare.

Another way in which the portfolio system has changed involves the reflection questions that are asked for each project. Initially there was a pre-determined set of three questions. These days, however, teachers are strongly encouraged to write their own reflection questions that are more specific to the content of the project. This change came about through a close examination of Universal Design for Learning and consideration of different student needs and content requirements.

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) refers to a way to effectively adapt curriculum for all students, including those with varied learning styles, sensory needs, cultural backgrounds, and language proficiencies. This framework is based on three primary principles:

1) Provide multiple means of presentation.
2) Provide multiple means of action and expression.
3) Provide multiple means of engagement.

A set of guidelines for instruction follows each principle. For more information about these guidelines, visit http://www.cast.org/udl/.

CAST (2011). *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.0.* Wakefield, MA:

Excerpt from a Portfolio Presentation with a 10th grader:

Teacher (T): Which subject would you like to present next?

Student (S): Trigonometry.

T: Oh good. I'm glad you're taking Trigonometry. You're ahead. That's good for college! So, you'll take AP Calculus next year?

S: I don't know yet. I hadn't really thought about it.

T: It's important to think about it now, so you can plan ahead.

S: Okay, I will.

T: Great. So, why do you think your teacher asked you to complete this problem set (referring to project)? How did it strengthen your skills in Trigonometry?

S: Well, after [I completed it] I noticed that a lot of the mistakes I made were about using the wrong solution [paths]. I realized that's because I originally relied on a calculator because I didn't know how to solve the problems algebraically. So that's a problem that I have that I'm trying to focus on now.

T: Great! In studying for the Regents, what practices have you developed that you're proud of?

S: I'm glad you asked that question. I've never even thought about that to be honest. In the beginning of the year I relied on regular flashcards, but now I use Delta Math.

T: Great! You read what you got wrong!

S: Yes, that's how I realized I didn't understand [how to solve the problems].

T: That's something that we've been working to get students to do. How do you think we can get other students to do what you did?

S: I'm not sure, but I'll think about it.

T: Thanks. That could really help us out.

Impact

Student Growth

MHSIS has a four-year graduation rate of 91%, which is above the city average. This success is attributable in part to MHSIS's focus on getting to know students as individuals. Portfolios are a key component of a system constructed to identify and support students' strengths and needs. This assessment system is designed to build off of students' strengths, and provide immediate one-to-one feedback about their areas of growth. "Portfolio presentations always involve an element of conversation," says Ms. Larson, "in which evaluators address the student as a learner and discuss their learning goals. This helps students to know that everyone here cares about them."

Students' speaking, language, and presentation skills are also developed through portfolios. According to Ms. Larson, "the process of speaking and presenting themselves and their work helps students to gain confidence and ease." Presentation skills account for a 40 out of a possible 100 points for portfolios, and are comprised of the following categories: project materials (10 points for completeness, 10 points for organization/neatness), professionalism (5 points for appropriate language and demeanor, 5 points for dress code, and 5 points for punctuality), and fluency (5 points for showing confidence and ease in subject matter and presentation).

In addition, students' overall achievement is impacted by the portfolio process. "Portfolio projects offer students multiple ways to engage in content and practice skills required on the Regents in multiple ways." For example, students are often required to write essays as part of their portfolio projects. This frequent practice helps to develop the depth and skill of their writing and fosters stamina.

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Template

Student Sample

Tools

Team Teacher

School Practice Sample

Instruction

Teachers embed opportunities to build these skills in daily instruction. All subject areas emphasize speaking skills through classroom discussions and presentations. Explicit preparation for portfolios occurs during Advisory. Ninth grade Advisories tend to spend the most time on preparation of all the grades, because students' speaking and presentation skills improve as they progress from one semester to the next.

Teacher Practice

One unplanned but positive outcome of the portfolio process is that it often serves as professional development for teachers who serve as evaluators, because they learn about different projects across curricula. These projects become resources that spark ideas for new ways to have students engage with content. The guidelines for the projects expose teachers to each other's questioning styles and strategies. David Meek, a biology teacher, notes, "You get to see the level of academic expectations and rigor in other courses. This makes me check in with myself in a way that I wouldn't do from just sitting in the staff lounge [sharing ideas] with colleagues."

Teacher

"[This process] gives me perspective on my own questioning techniques. I checked in with my own questioning when I saw others' portfolio guidelines"

-David Meek, Biology teacher

Successes and Challenges

Successes

It is evident that the portfolio system has contributed to MHSIS students' success. Portfolio presentations challenge students to learn and retain a deep understanding of content matter. They also build language skills since students are required to formulate ideas and opinions about content, and learn to express them clearly through this practice.

This language practice has impacted all students, particularly English Language Learners. One way that portfolios contribute to student success is evident in the case of graduating Senior Sarah Bamba. Sarah is a graduating senior who will attend State University of New York at Buffalo in September. When she started at MHSIS in ninth grade, she hardly knew any English. By November of that year she was already proficient. She attributes this to her intense focus and determination to learn English. She attended Saturday school every week for help with portfolio projects, and this provided even more time to practice English. Her determination, along with structures and support of MHSIS, has resulted in English proficiency that has enabled her academic achievement.

Another impact of the portfolio process is on the school community. Portfolio presentations provide time for students and teachers to meet one-on-one to reflect and think about learning. Through this process, students and teachers who are not scheduled to interact regularly will meet and learn about each other. Teachers have the opportunity to learn how their own students perform in other subjects, and students get to know staff members who might be their teachers in later grades.

Challenges

Although the portfolio system is a natural extension of MHSIS's focus on building deep comprehension and college and career readiness skills, implementation and maintenance of this system is not without challenges. In order for evaluators to understand the intent behind the questions that subject teachers develop for portfolios, they must fully understand the projects themselves. Guidelines must be written very clearly, and must include all possible correct answers. For some subject areas this is even more necessary. For example, Ms. Larson points out, not all teachers have sufficient mathematics content knowledge to know how to assess student responses to questions. Therefore, guidelines for math projects must be especially clear. However, Ms. Larson states that no teacher has ever expressed an inability to evaluate a subject. Focus on clarity of guidelines, along with MHSIS's culture of collaboration, provide adequate support for teachers to evaluate any subject.

Another challenge in implementing and maintaining this system is timing. In order for portfolio presentations to happen when scheduled, all projects need to be developed, assigned, completed, graded, and returned by strict deadlines. Because of this, it can be difficult for teachers to assign three projects a semester of equal value and rigor. Additionally, any changes made to the portfolio presentation requirements need to be made before the school year begins, so that teachers can adjust project expectations accordingly. Mr. Rossi, a math teacher who has been at the school for ten years, explains that any change to the portfolio process needs to be very well thought out far in advance, and all changes must be announced early in September. When this doesn't happen within this time frame, teachers have to make adjustments mid-year, which can cause conflict and confusion for students.

Thinking Forward

Ms. Larson is thinking deeply about how to improve this system for the 2014-15 school year. She is currently building a team of teachers from across departments to meet over the summer, examine the portfolio system, and develop a plan for changes. For example, Ms. Larson is considering shifting from three to two projects per semester. This change would address the concern that teachers have about having enough time to develop, assign, and grade three equally meaningful projects per semester. It also would enable increased rigor for each project and allow time for students to go deeper into revision process. Ms. Larson also wants the team to think about changes that will make portfolio presentations more student-directed. She feels that students need to take ownership over this work, and doing so will help them to develop confidence in their ability to communicate in a formal and professional manner. This will further develop their college and career readiness skills.

This team will also have the opportunity to examine projects and guidelines across departments and grades, in order to identify the skills that are necessary for all subjects. Doing this will enable teachers to examine best practices in questioning and consider which types of questions evoke the best responses, so that they can revise the reflection questions to elicit more thoughtful responses.

Portfolio projects require students to form opinions about content. Portfolio presentations enable students to build language skills as they practice expressing these opinions:

Evaluator: *Do you think this book was simplistic, over-rated, or just-right?*

Student: *I think it was just right.*

Evaluator: *Why?*

Student: *I didn't see it as over-rated, because the Holocaust actually happened. I connected deeply with the book. It described the Holocaust in different ways then other texts I've read before. The anthropomorphism of the cats and mice gave me a better understanding of the degree of hatred that existed at this time.*

Ms. Larson expects that participating on this team will provide staff members with insights into assessment, questioning, project development, and the best conditions for MHSIS's student growth. These insights will likely yield improvements not only to the school wide system, but to individual teacher practices as well.