



# The Rise of Student Growth Portfolio Models in Tennessee

**Division of Data and Research**  
Research and Strategy Team  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Over the last several years, Tennessee has rapidly expanded the use of student growth portfolio models for the purpose of teacher evaluation. Participation, both in the number of districts and teachers, has increased steadily since portfolios were first introduced during the 2011–12 school year, and we expect that participation will continue to grow. The Tennessee General Assembly passed legislation in the spring of 2016 requiring that districts receiving state funding for voluntary pre-kindergarten (VPK) use the state board-approved student growth portfolio model to evaluate their pre-K and kindergarten teachers.<sup>1</sup> In the 2015–16 school year, almost all Tennessee districts had state-funded VPK, meaning the new legislation will significantly expand the use and overall impact of portfolios.

Portfolios provide teachers in non-tested grades and subject areas with the opportunity to receive an individual growth score that is based on their specific contributions to their own students' learning. Having such a score, which in the past was only available to teachers in tested grades and subject areas through the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS), ensures evaluation of a larger group of teachers using similar measures and offers teachers a more personalized evaluation experience. In addition, the reflective nature of the portfolio process—in which teachers collect, review, and submit student work samples throughout the school year—is considered a valuable professional learning experience for teachers.

This brief provides an overview of student growth portfolio models and the process used for assigning teachers' final growth scores. It then addresses the following questions:

- 1 **What is the alignment between teachers' portfolio scores and their average observation scores?**
- 2 **Are teachers' overall evaluation scores higher or lower if they use portfolios as individual growth measures, rather than relying on school-wide growth measures?**
- 3 **Did participation in portfolios lead to improvements in teaching practices?**
- 4 **Do teachers who participate in portfolios have more supportive views of the teacher evaluation process?**

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## Key Findings

- Teachers' portfolio scores are well-aligned with their observation scores. Eighty-seven percent of teachers during the 2013–14 school year and 78 percent of teachers during the 2014–15 school year received portfolio and average observations scores within one point of each other.
- Roughly 50 percent of teachers who used a portfolio received a higher growth score than they would have if they had used a school-wide growth measure. About 20 percent of teachers received the same score.
- Compared to similar teachers, those who used a portfolio had slightly higher observation scores in the year they participated. Portfolio users saw the greatest improvement on the thinking, activities and materials, and problem solving indicators.
- Teachers who used a portfolio did not have markedly different perceptions of the teacher evaluation process than teachers who were eligible but did not use portfolio. Teachers on the whole reported that portfolios were more appropriate and more understandable as part of their evaluation than any other measure, aside from observation.

## PORTFOLIO USE

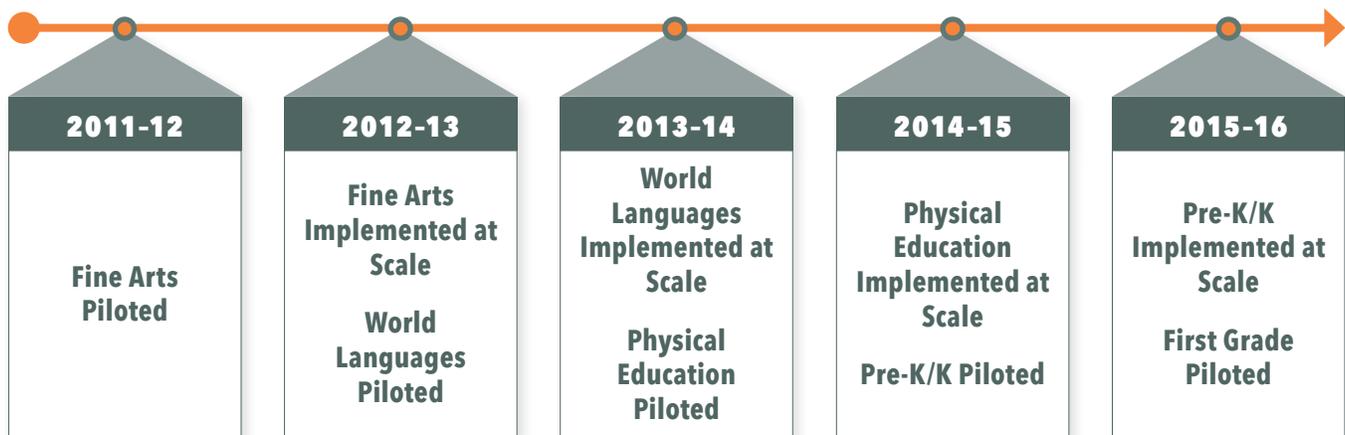
There are currently five types of student growth portfolio models—fine arts, first grade, physical education, pre-K/ kindergarten, and world languages. Figure 1 details the year each model was piloted and then fully implemented. The use of portfolios is a district-level decision. If a district opts in to a particular student growth portfolio model, all teachers in the district teaching in that particular area must use a portfolio.<sup>2</sup>

In the 2015–16 school year, 22 districts used at least one of these models. The fine arts student growth portfolio model, which was the first one to be developed, is the most widely used; during the 2015–16 school year, it was used in 20 districts. Overall, the total number of portfolios has increased in the last three years (see Figure 2). In the 2014–15 school year, roughly 12 percent of fine arts, kindergarten, pre-K, physical education, and world language teachers

used a student growth portfolio model. During the 2015–16 school year, this number increased to 16 percent.

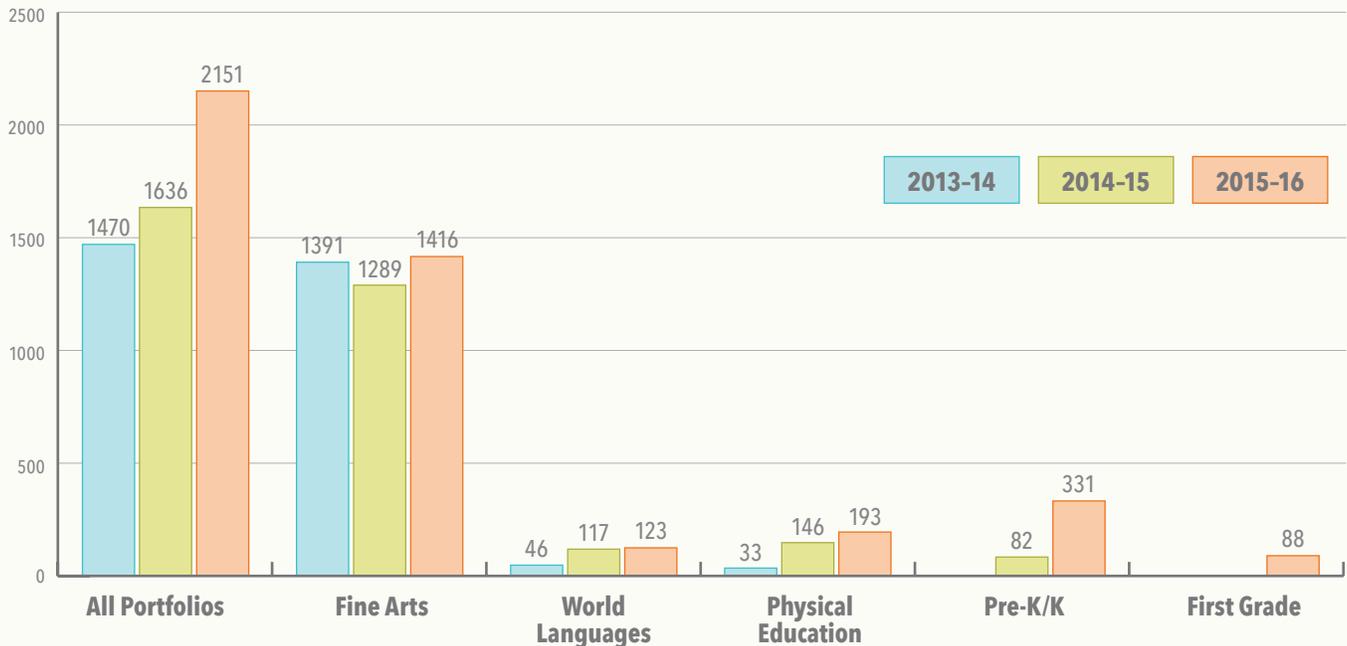
### Portfolio Process

Using a portfolio data management system, teachers must submit point A and point B student samples throughout the school year. There are four evidence collections per school year, and each collection reflects a standard-specific domain relevant to the content area of the portfolio. Student work samples should show how instructional practices employed by a teacher have an impact on the learning of children of varying levels of achievement. Each evidence collection must show point A and point B work from one emerging student, one proficient student, and one advanced student.<sup>3</sup> Portfolios are scored using a consensus review protocol that ensures reliability.



**Figure 1.** Rollout of portfolio models in Tennessee

The total number of portfolios has increased in the last three years.



**Figure 2.** Number of teachers using each portfolio model over the past three years<sup>4</sup>

## FINDINGS

Student growth portfolio models are intended to serve as both a measure of teacher effectiveness and a professional learning tool, and the findings from this research confirm that they are indeed supporting teachers in each of these areas.

### Alignment with Observation Scores

Teachers' portfolio scores are well-aligned with their observation scores (Figure 3). In 2013-14, most teachers (87 percent) received portfolio and average observation scores within one point. This alignment stayed high, but decreased somewhat (78 percent within one point) during the 2014-15 school year. In that year, teachers tended to score lower on

the newer student growth portfolio models, which included physical education and world languages.

### Change in Evaluation Growth Scores

About 50 percent of teachers who used a portfolio received a higher growth score than they would have if they had used a school-wide growth measure, and about 20 percent of teachers received the same score (see Figure 4). This means we only see about 30 percent of teachers receiving a worse growth score than they would have if they had used a school-wide growth measure.

Teachers' portfolio scores are well-aligned with their observation scores.

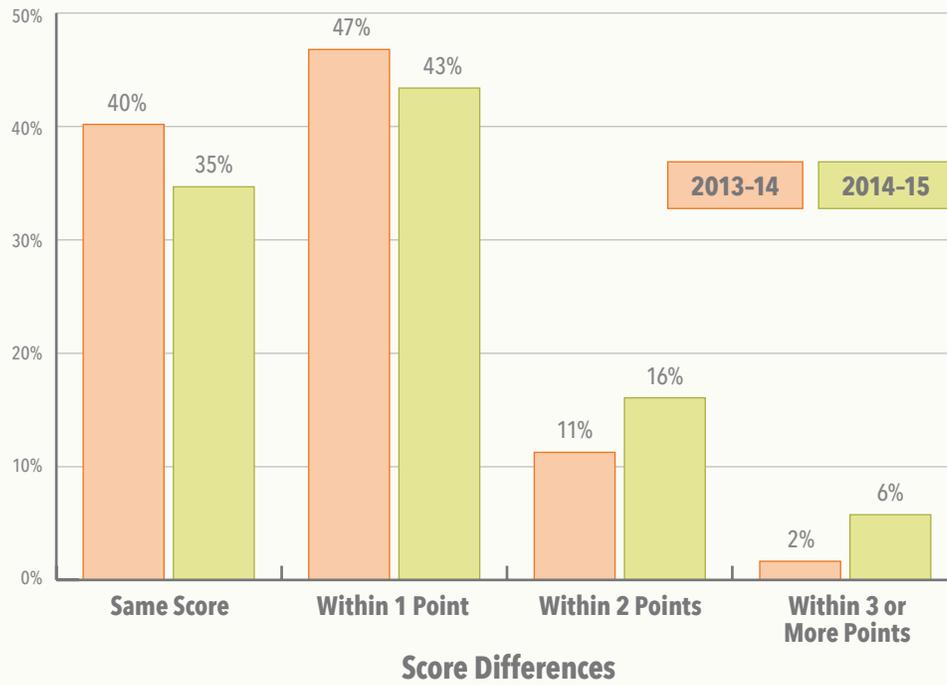


Figure 3. Alignment of portfolio and average observation scores

About two-thirds of teachers who used a portfolio received the same or a higher growth score than they would have if they had used a school-wide growth measure.

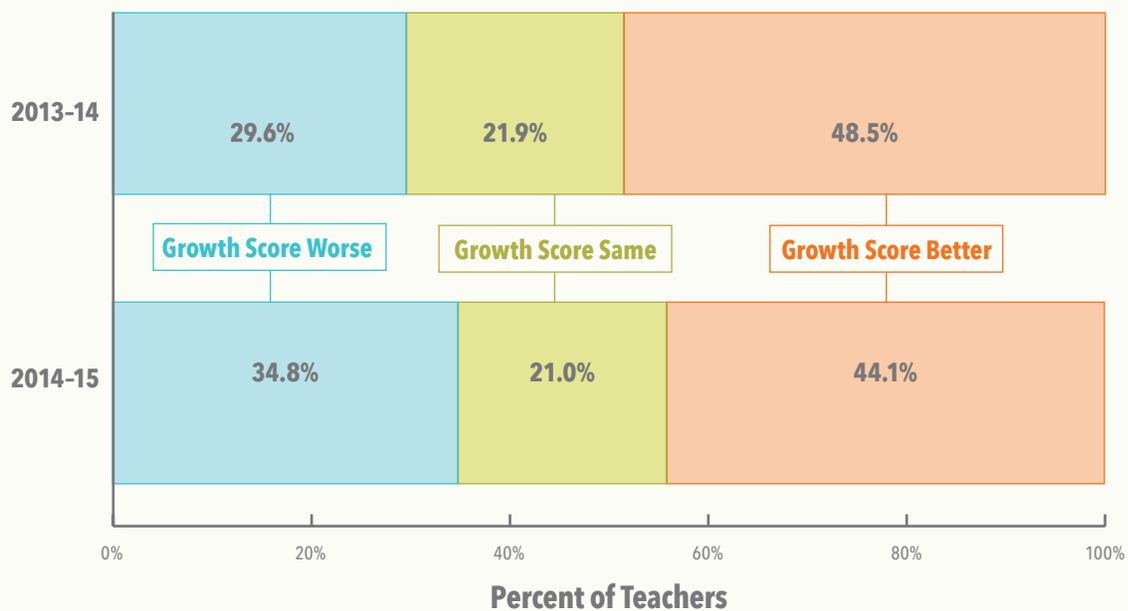
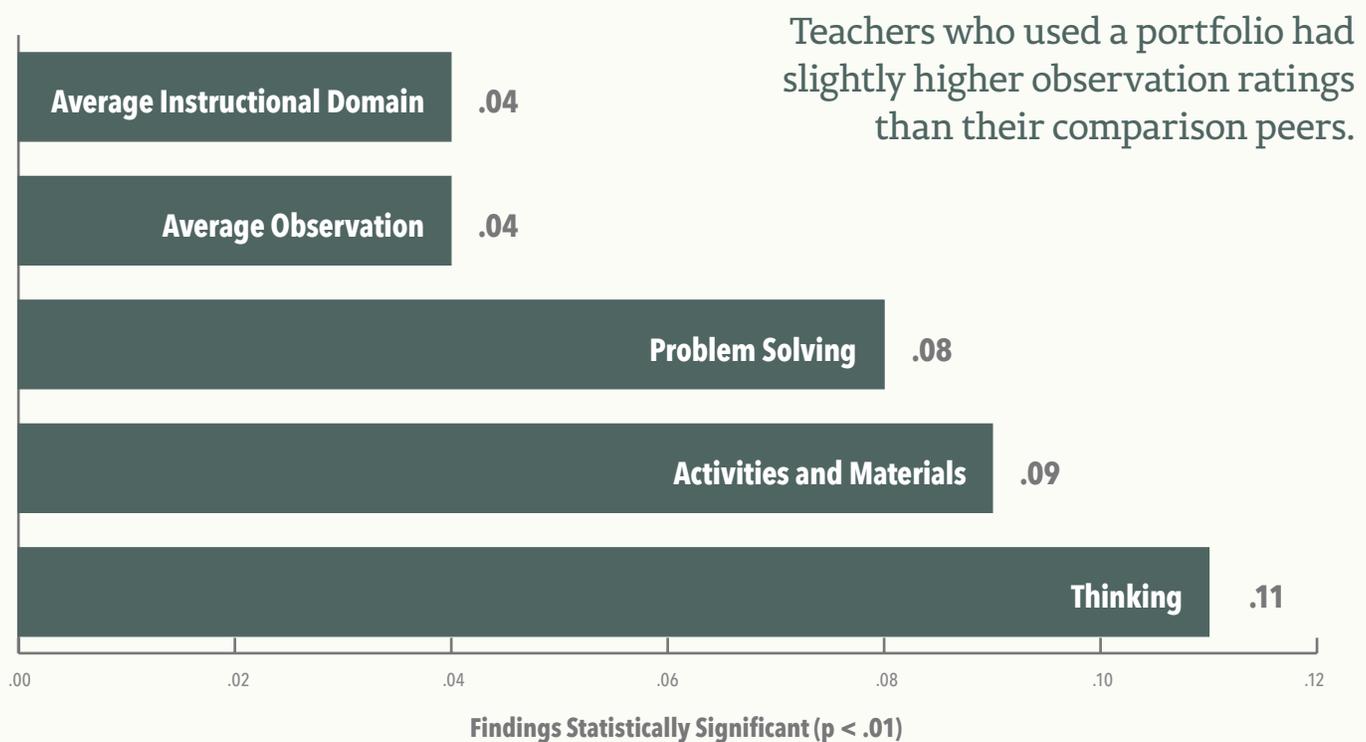


Figure 4. Comparison of growth scores using portfolio instead of school-wide growth measures

## Impact on Teacher Practice

Teachers who used a portfolio had slightly higher observation ratings than their comparison peers for three instructional domain indicators, the average instructional domain score, and the average observation score (see Figure 5). To make this determination, we looked at observation scores of teachers within the same school, comparing those who were eligible but did not use a portfolio to those who were eligible and did use a portfolio.<sup>5</sup> Further, our analysis

controlled for teachers' prior observation scores, education level, and years of experience. While these differences may seem small, a difference of a tenth of a point represents about half of the average growth seen in teaching practices from the first to second year of teaching. Thus, these results suggest that participating in the portfolio process leads to improvements in key teaching practices.



**Figure 5.** Difference in observation scores for student growth portfolio model participants compared to non-participants

### What do improvements in classroom instructional practices mean for students?

- Students participated in challenging learning experiences that supported lesson objectives, sustained students' attention, provided opportunities for student-to-student interaction, and incorporated resources beyond the school curriculum texts.
- Students engaged in activities requiring them to use a variety of problem-solving strategies, including identifying relevant and irrelevant information, categorization, predicting outcomes, drawing conclusions, and improving solutions.
- Students received instruction in different types of thinking, such as analytical, practical creative, and research-based thinking. Students also received more opportunities to generate ideas, analyze problems from multiple perspectives, and monitor their thinking.

### Influence on Teachers' Perceptions of Evaluation

According to data from the 2014–15 Tennessee Educator Survey, teachers who used a portfolio did not have markedly different perceptions of the teacher evaluation process than teachers who were eligible but did not use a portfolio.<sup>8</sup> Figure 6 shows that portfolio teachers' perceptions of the evaluation system in terms of fairness, improvements in their teaching, and improvements in student learning were similar to perceptions of non-portfolio teachers.

This lack of difference in evaluation perceptions suggests that teachers are not yet recognizing the value of using a portfolio. Encouragingly, however, on the 2015–16 Tennessee Educator Survey, teachers on the whole reported that portfolios were more appropriate and more understandable as part of their evaluation than any other measure aside from observation (see Figure 7).

Teachers who used a portfolio did not have markedly different perceptions of the teacher evaluation process.

Teachers who were eligible but did not use a portfolio growth model in 2014–15.

Teachers who used a portfolio growth model in 2014–15.

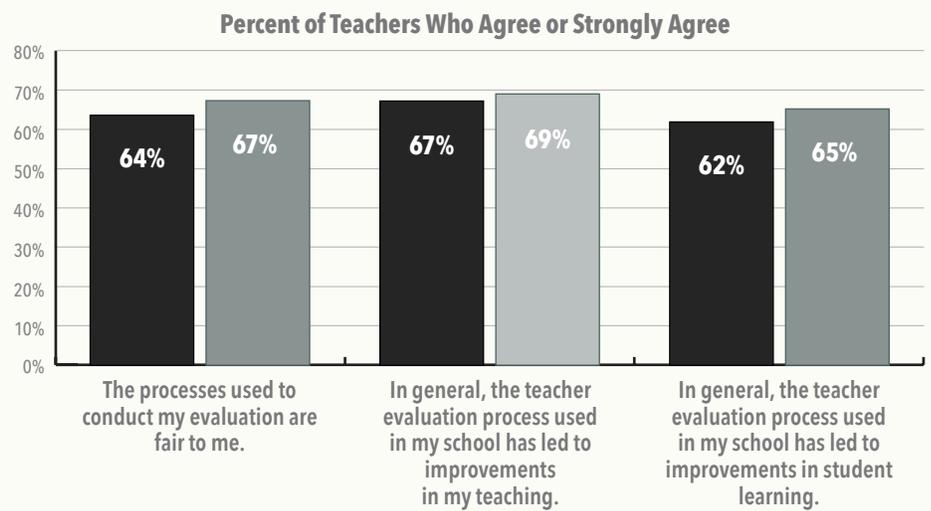


Figure 6. Difference in perceptions of evaluation fairness and impact on teaching and student learning for student growth portfolio model participants compared to non-participants

However, teachers overall reported that portfolios were more appropriate and more understandable as part of their evaluation than any other measure aside from observation.

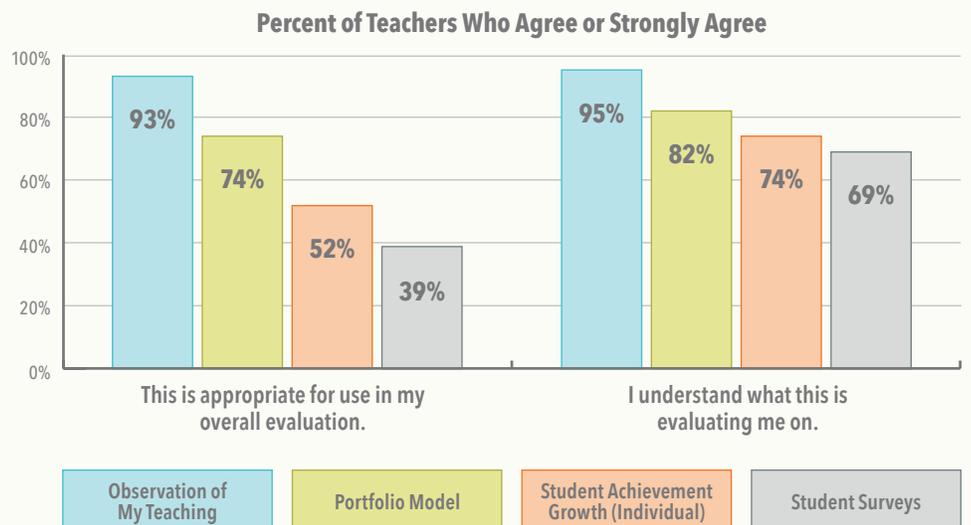


Figure 7. Teacher perceptions of appropriateness and understandability of evaluation measures

## FINAL THOUGHTS

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Student growth portfolio models are directly related to the Educator Support priority area of Tennessee's strategic plan, *Tennessee Succeeds*. This priority area includes embedded strategies focused on improving the accuracy and the quality of the feedback educators receive and supporting district development of more effective, personalized professional learning. Accordingly, the department is committed to continuous refinement of the portfolio process to ensure that we uphold a level of rigor that fosters both student growth and the professional learning of educators.

The findings summarized in this brief are generally positive: portfolios produced scores that were well-aligned to teacher observation scores, helped teachers earn higher overall evaluation scores, and helped teachers improve both their average observation scores and their scores on specific indicators such as thinking, activities and materials, and problem solving. Overall, this suggests that portfolios are strengthening the department's efforts to create a more accurate, individualized evaluation system with components that serve as both high-quality measures of effectiveness and valuable professional learning tools.

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## NOTES

1. Implementation of this legislation began in 2016–17 with state-led training for all districts with VPK programs; these districts must implement the pre-K/kindergarten student growth portfolio model in 2017–18.
2. Note that, in accordance with the legislation passed in the spring of 2016, districts with VPK programs must implement the pre-K/K student growth portfolio model.
3. Each evidence collection for the physical education student growth portfolio model must show pre- and post-work from two emerging, two proficient, and two advanced students.
4. The decline in fine arts student growth portfolio models from 2013–14 was due to new municipal districts surrounding Shelby County opting not to use portfolios.
5. "Eligible" teachers include any teachers assigned to a pre-K, kindergarten, K–12 fine arts (e.g., music, art), K–12 physical education, or 7–12 world languages classroom. In the analysis of observation scores described above, if a district opted to use a fine arts student growth portfolio model, then the within-school, elementary level comparison is between fine arts teachers who were using a portfolio and pre-K, kindergarten, and physical education teachers who were not using a portfolio.
6. In the analysis of survey data, the comparison is between any pre-K, kindergarten, K–12 fine arts (e.g., music, art), K–12 physical education, or 7–12 world languages teachers who used a portfolio during the 2014–15 school year and any teachers with the same assignments who did not use a portfolio during the 2014–15 school year.

