



# Performance Assessment Profile: Hillsdale High School

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Seniors defend their portfolios in front of a panel. Freshmen come, 10th-graders, 11th-graders also come around and see those. What that has infused the rest of the school with is a common expectation around defense of work. Knowing that you have to be able to answer questions you weren't necessarily prepared for, how to think on your feet, that there's some common focal areas that are going to be discussed; your proficiency, your growth, your challenges. Everyone's going to do that. That creates a common experience for the entire school so that it's not just isolated in one AP class that was maybe going to do that. This is the work of the school and...this is the kind of work that we believe is really authentic college preparation for 21st century job work.

*-Hillsdale High School Teacher<sup>1</sup>*

This teacher's description of the graduate defense process at Hillsdale High School demonstrates the level of academic rigor to which all students are exposed through the school's performance assessment system. Performance assessments place an emphasis on assessing higher order thinking skills, driving high-quality instruction, and developing deep content knowledge in order to support [21st century learning](#) outcomes. This type of assessment is becoming increasingly popular in schools and districts in California and around the country as a means to evaluate students' college and career readiness. The profile explores Hillsdale's performance assessment system in depth. The tools and structures described here will be helpful for anyone who is interested in learning more about how to implement performance assessments in a large public high school.

## Overview of Hillsdale High School

Hillsdale High School, one of seven public high schools in the San Mateo Union High School District, is located near San Francisco. Hillsdale first opened in 1955 and serves approximately 1,500 students from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (see Figure 1). Hillsdale is a California Distinguished School, a designation for schools that offer outstanding education programs and practices, including positive performance and progress on indicators such as student test scores, disciplinary rates, and English learner outcomes.

**Figure 1. Hillsdale High School at a Glance (2017–2018)**

<b>Student Enrollment</b>	1,534
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	38% White 30% Latino 21% Asian, Filipino, or Pacific Islander 10% Other 1% African American
<b>Students From Low-Income Families<sup>a</sup></b>	20%
<b>English Learners<sup>b</sup></b>	11%

<sup>a</sup> Percentage of students who qualified for a free or reduced-price meal in 2017–2018.

<sup>b</sup> Does not include English learners who have been reclassified as “fluent English proficient.”

Source: California Department of Education DataQuest.

Hillsdale’s mission is “to enable all students to reach their academic and personal potential.” Students, parents, and staff advance this mission by working to achieve four cornerstone goals:

1. **Equity** through the core curriculum and high standards; differentiated learning, teacher collaboration, and professional development; and understanding, respect, and celebration of diversity.
2. **Personalization** through community/parent connections, sense of community, integrity, honesty, and responsibility.
3. **Rigor** through implementation of state content standards; the Hillsdale graduate profile; and authentic learning opportunities (including project-based learning, portfolios, and defenses).
4. **Shared decision making** through democratic structures, distributed leadership, consensus building, and autonomy.

Hillsdale began a redesign process in 2002 in order to better support these goals, moving from a traditional comprehensive high school structure to [Smaller Learning Communities](#) (SLCs). The purpose of this change was to increase students' participation and success in rigorous college preparatory classes, with an emphasis on personalized learning and authentic forms of instruction and assessment such as project-based learning, student portfolios, and senior defenses. The SLC approach divides the 1,500-student body into smaller units, or "houses," of 200–280 students each. The core teachers of a house (English language arts, social studies, mathematics, and science) work together across disciplines to align curricula and projects. Students stay with their assigned house for 9th and 10th grades and are re-sorted into a new house with a new set of core teachers and advisors for 11th and 12th grades. Since the redesign process began in 2002, Hillsdale has been a partner of the School Redesign Network, which is part of the [Stanford Graduate School of Education](#). Through this initiative, Hillsdale has offered [study visits](#) to more than 400 educators nationwide who want to learn about the school's instructional practices, performance assessment system, and teacher-led redesign effort.

## History of Performance Assessments at Hillsdale High School

One of the authentic learning opportunities that Hillsdale's core curriculum offers students in all grade levels is the experience of building a portfolio of their work. Students use the portfolio to document their progress in each class and reflect on their learning over time. All 12th-grade students create a **graduate portfolio** and present an accompanying **portfolio defense**, during which they share and defend their learning to a committee.

Hillsdale is the only school in San Mateo Union High School District to require a portfolio and defense for graduation. Because these requirements exceed the minimum graduation standards for the district as a whole, Hillsdale issues students a school-specific diploma. Those students who do not successfully complete the defense but have met all other graduation requirements are eligible to receive a San Mateo Union High School District diploma.

This performance assessment requirement began as a senior exhibition, which was in place from 1997 to 2011, in which students wrote an eight- to 15-page research paper as part of their humanities coursework and presented it to a faculty panel each May. Over time, the panel evolved to include community mentors and faculty from outside of the humanities. In 2009, Hillsdale High School staff worked with the [Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity \(SCALE\)](#) to develop the Hillsdale High School [graduate profile](#), which defines the academic and social preparation that all students are expected to achieve by the time they finish 12th grade (namely effective communication, reading proficiency, critical thinking, respectful behavior, and the ability to understand and apply knowledge and skills). Students then began to build portfolios of their work to demonstrate their proficiency in the graduate profile competencies. They also began to engage in structured metacognitive reflection and assessment of their own work. From 2012 to 2014, students had to complete a senior mastery project in addition to the portfolio, which included a six- to eight-page paper assessed by the entire faculty. The next section describes the current version of the performance assessment system, which began in 2014 after several years of strengthening the portfolio project process.

## How Hillsdale’s Performance Assessment System Works

Hillsdale students spend class time working on their portfolios throughout their 4 years in high school. Each year, students demonstrate their academic growth by completing one to three tasks per class to add to their portfolios. They also reflect on their progress toward achieving the competencies described in the Hillsdale graduate profile. Those competencies include effective communication, reading proficiency, critical thinking, respectful behavior, and the ability to understand and apply knowledge and skills (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Excerpt From the Hillsdale High School Graduate Profile**

As a Hillsdale graduate, you will be able to:

- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| <b>Read</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Comprehend complex literary and informational texts and make evidence-based inferences and interpretations.</li><li>• Analyze structural components of texts and interpret words, terms, and symbols.</li><li>• Identify the author’s perspective/purpose and provide justification of how it shapes the text.</li><li>• Integrate content from diverse media and formats.</li><li>• Use a variety of strategies to make meaning of text and monitor difficulties.</li></ul> |
| <b>Think</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Critically:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ Ask critical questions.</li><li>◦ Generate hypotheses.</li><li>◦ View problems from multiple perspectives.</li><li>◦ Analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information.</li><li>◦ Pursue answers and solutions through research, experimentation, and/or computation.</li></ul></li><li>• Creatively: Generate unique answers and interpretations.</li><li>• Metacognitively: Reflect upon and assess your work.</li></ul>    |

Source: Hillsdale High School graduate profile.

Throughout the portfolio development process, students deepen their understanding of academic content while working toward the graduate profile competencies. In 9th and 10th grades, students focus on metacognition and explore the Hillsdale graduate profile by aligning their portfolio pieces with the competencies they will be expected to achieve by the time they graduate. Students in 10th grade also participate in a sophomore defense in which they select portfolio content to defend and then present to a small group of their peers, advisors, and parents. The preparation, coaching, and presentation process varies by house, and occurs either in humanities or advisory classes. In 11th grade, the focus is on skills and content. Students assess their growth and content mastery thus far, and, in preparation for senior year, write a detailed reflection on their successes and challenges as related to the graduate profile. In 12th grade, students continue to assess their growth and content mastery while working on their graduate portfolio and preparing for the culminating defense. As part of this process, they select an academic content area to focus on for their defense and polish their work products and presentation to showcase their expertise in this content area.

## Graduate Portfolio Artifacts

The Hillsdale portfolio process concludes in 12th grade as seniors choose an academic focus area, complete their portfolio to ensure that the graduate profile competencies are fully represented, and prepare for their defense. The graduate portfolio has three primary components:

1. **Graduate profile table of contents:** A digital chart in which students analyze how each portfolio entry aligns with the graduate profile competencies.
2. **Portfolio entries, reflections, and graded rubrics:** A set of entries, including at least one from each academic content area, that is organized by subject matter. An entry is a task or assignment, such as a Spanish paper, lab report, or mathematics project. Each entry is accompanied by a reflection written by the student and a rubric graded by the teacher, both of which are based on the graduate profile. Other significant work (such as documentation from a mock trial team to represent communication) can augment these academic entries.
3. **Proficiency-Growth-Challenge Reflection Inventory:** A guided reflection in which students assess how they have demonstrated proficiency (what they are able to do consistently and with high quality) and growth (what they used to struggle with at the beginning of their time at Hillsdale but are now able to do) in selected graduate profile competencies. They also identify a challenge they still face. For the growth and challenge sections, students identify three pieces of their portfolio work as evidence. Sample [growth](#) and [challenge](#) reflections are available to students. Students begin this reflection process in their 11th-grade advisory class and finish it during the first semester of their 12th-grade advisory class.

## The Graduate Portfolio Defense

In March of the senior year, students present their graduate defense, during which they demonstrate what they know, and what they can do. The defense takes approximately 2 hours to complete and involves five components:

1. **Application task** by which students demonstrate that they can apply their previous learning to a new situation.
2. **Student presentation** on their growth and future challenges, chosen portfolio work, and the application task.
3. **Panel questioning** to probe students' content knowledge and personal growth.
4. **Panel deliberation** on how to score the presentation.
5. **Discussion and decision** in which the panel gathers the student's feedback on their performance and shares the final presentation score with the student.

All Hillsdale seniors engage in a general application task as part of the graduate defense. The task presents students with a thought-provoking question along with several related articles and [guiding prompts](#). Students receive these materials shortly before their defense takes place and have 1 hour to read and respond.

## What Is an Application Task?

Hillsdale seniors have been building their graduate portfolio for nearly 4 years and practicing their presentation for months. Now, 1 hour prior to their graduate portfolio defense, they receive a new assignment known as an “application task.” The task requires students to evaluate a question related to a topic in the news. Students have an hour to read four sources they have never seen before to which they apply the reading strategies and critical-thinking skills they have developed during their time at Hillsdale. They must then present their analysis of the topic to an audience of teachers and peers.

Each year, teachers prepare extensive packets of material on various current events and social issues. These packets provide context and carefully curated sources for students to read and analyze as they prepare their arguments, including opinion pieces and factual information. Students use a worksheet with guiding prompts to help structure their presentation on the topic and organize the evidence for their position.

For one of the recent application tasks, students were asked to take a position on [whether progress in artificial intelligence will help the U.S. economy](#). The packet contained four documents:

- A White House blog post summarizing a report on artificial intelligence and the economy.
- An online article from Newsweek by an author who writes about technology and society.
- An online post from OneReach, a telecommunications service provider.
- A political cartoon.

The assignment task presents a unique challenge: It requires an ability to think quickly and critically while applying previously rehearsed skills to a new topic and set of resources. There is no right or wrong answer. As long as students are able to confidently present an evidence-based argument, they will have succeeded at the task.

When the 8- to 9-minute defense presentation begins, students reflect on themselves as learners, describe their postsecondary goals, and summarize their areas of growth and challenges related to the graduate profile. They then move on to describe one or two portfolio items in the academic focus area they selected. Each department has its own requirements regarding the nature and quantity of portfolio pieces a student needs to defend. For example, students who choose English language arts as their area of focus select one nonfiction or expository piece and one literary analysis or narrative piece. They must also present an English department application task in addition to the general application task that all seniors complete. When presenting the application task, students describe the topic, identify the reading strategies they used, evaluate the sources they were provided for credibility and reliability, and explain their conclusions using evidence.

After the presentation, students spend 20 minutes answering questions from a panel made up of two teachers (or one teacher and one community volunteer), which also may include a non-senior student. Underclassmen are invited to listen, with no classes held on the 2 days of defenses. The panel asks questions about the student’s graduate profile reflection, department work, and application task. Hillsdale teachers have developed stock questions about the graduate profile reflection process and content, and each department also has its own set of [defense questions](#) based on a shared set of guidelines for developing strong questions (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Sample English Department Questions for Defense**

<b>General Skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What reading strategies do you employ for dealing with difficult texts?</li> <li>• Choose two different types of writing you have done that used evidence. Explain the types of evidence you used and how you chose which evidence to use.</li> </ul>
<b>General Content</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is one piece of writing you really enjoyed throughout your 4 years of high school?</li> <li>• Discuss two of the following terms in relation to the one passage you have been given, including how the passage fits into the larger theme(s) of the overall work: voice, mood, symbolism, diction, motif, characterization techniques, rhetorical devices (logos, pathos, ethos, etc.), literary devices, etc.</li> </ul>
<b>Task Specific</b>	<p><i>Lord of the Flies</i> or <i>Romeo and Juliet</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does the author’s purpose in [a particular passage] connect to the author’s purpose in the larger work?</li> <li>• Which of these techniques [tone, setting, characterization, diction, figurative language, etc.] is most important [in this passage] for how the author achieves his purpose? Why?</li> </ul> <p>Personal Narrative on Immigration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain your note-taking strategies (e.g., recording? multiple interviews?) and how you developed new questions to gather more of a picture of your interviewee’s experience.</li> <li>• How did you communicate your interviewee’s impetus to leave, the journey, and adapting to a new location?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Which technique fit best and why? (Examples of techniques include show not tell, diction, interior monologue, dialogue, chronological sequence versus flashback.)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Following a 10-minute deliberation among panelists regarding the student’s performance, the defense culminates in a discussion in which the panel asks the student to reflect on how the defense went and shares their scoring decision with the student.

### Scoring the Graduate Profile and Defense

To determine whether students’ portfolios meet the standard for a passing score, Hillsdale teachers use eight rubrics covering the five different graduate profile competencies, with communication skills broken down into four separate rubrics:

1. Understand and Apply Content
2. Read for Understanding
3. Think Critically and Creatively
4. Respect Self and Community
5. Communicate Effectively:
  - a. Oral Communication
  - b. Narrative Writing
  - c. Informative Writing
  - d. Argumentative Writing

For example, one of the communication rubrics focuses on informative writing (see Figure 4). Some of the competencies that the rubric assesses include the extent to which students are able to develop and explain a topic using relevant facts and details, provide a conclusion that supports the topic and examines its implications and significance, and demonstrate an understanding of standard English and disciplinary-specific writing conventions.



**Figure 4. Excerpt From the Graduate Profile Rubric on Communicate Effectively: Informative Writing**

	Exceeding Standard	Meeting Standard	Approaching Standard	Initial Stages
<b>Development</b>	The text provides significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, and/or examples that thoroughly develop and explain the topic.	The text provides relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, and/or examples that sufficiently develop and explain the topic.	The text provides facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, and/or examples that develop the topic.	The text provides some facts, definitions, details, quotations, and/or examples that attempt to develop and explain the topic, but do not do so effectively/clearly.
<b>Conclusion</b>	The text provides an engaging conclusion that supports the topic and examines its implications and significance.	The text provides a competent conclusion that supports the topic and examines its implications and significance.	The text provides a conclusion that supports the topic and examines its implications and significance.	The text may provide a simple conclusion that supports the topic.
<b>Conventions</b>	The text intentionally uses standard English conventions of spelling, grammar, and punctuation while specifically attending to the norms of the discipline in which they are writing (MLA, APA, etc.).	The text demonstrates standard English conventions of spelling, grammar, and punctuation while suitably attending to the norms of the discipline in which they are writing (MLA, APA, etc.).	The text demonstrates a limited facility with standard English conventions of spelling, grammar, and punctuation while attending to the norms of the discipline in which they are writing (MLA, APA, etc.).	The text demonstrates little accuracy in standard English conventions of spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

### Revision Opportunities for the Graduate Defense

In order to receive a Hillsdale diploma, students are required to pass the graduate defense at a certain level of proficiency. For sophomores, the expectation is that, at minimum, half of the rubric categories are at “Meeting Standard” and half are at “Approaching Standard.” Seniors must achieve “Meeting Standard” in all rubric categories. About 70% of students pass the defense the first time, and the remaining 30% work with both their faculty coach and advisor to revise their material and defend again later in March.

As part of passing the defense, students are required to fulfill the “Respect Self and Community” section of the rubric. This section assesses students on the development of their personal habits (e.g., perseverance, integrity), interactions with others (e.g., engaging in civil discourse, making connections between school and world), and reflection (e.g., postsecondary academic goals, responding to feedback). This element of the rubric has a separate revision process, and students who do not initially pass this section work with their coach on alternative options, which could include a written reflection on responsibility and relationships and/or on-campus community service.



## School Instruction and Support

Hillsdale has put a number of structures in place to support students throughout the portfolio process, with the most intensive support available for 12th-grade students preparing for the senior defense.

Smaller Learning Communities, discussed earlier, provide a general support system because they enable teachers to provide highly individualized attention to students engaged in building their portfolios and developing their defenses. Hillsdale also runs on a partial block schedule, in which students attend fewer classes with longer class periods on Wednesdays and Thursdays. This allows for more time to have in-depth discussions and participate in project-based learning. On Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays, students attend all their classes (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Hillsdale Partial Block Schedule**

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Period 1 7:45–8:35	Period 1 7:45–8:35	Period 1 7:45–9:13	Staff meeting (staff only)	Period 1 7:45–8:35
Period 2 8:40–9:30	Period 2 8:40–9:30		Brunch	Period 2 8:40–9:30
Brunch	Brunch	Advisory 9:28–10:06	Period 2 9:20–10:48	Brunch
Advisory 9:45–10:10	Advisory 9:45–10:10	Period 3 10:11–11:39		Period 4 10:53–12:21
Period 3 10:15–11:05	Period 3 10:15–11:05		Lunch	
Period 4 11:10–12:00	Period 4 11:10–12:00	Period 5 12:14–1:42		Extended Advisory 12:56–1:42
Lunch	Lunch		Period 6 1:30–2:20	
Period 5 12:35–1:25	Period 5 12:35–1:25	Period 7 1:47–3:15		Period 6 1:47–3:15
Period 6 1:30–2:20	Period 6 1:30–2:20		Period 7 2:25–3:15	
Period 7 2:25–3:15	Period 7 2:25–3:15			

Another one of the support structures built into the schedule is the advisory period, which occurs 5 days a week and includes a focus on study skills, academic and test literacy, and college and career searches. Thursdays include an extended 45-minute advisory period for students to study, see teachers for extra support, and access the library and computer labs. For seniors, this advisory period allows for substantial support in preparing their graduate portfolio and defense.

In addition to the advisory period, seniors receive direct one-on-one support from a coach. Each teacher has a caseload of four students to coach through the defense process in their content area of expertise. Four afternoons during the year are set aside specifically for coaches to meet with their students and

prepare for the defense, and teachers also have two sessions of professional development to prepare for these responsibilities. The master schedule for students is modified for this purpose with “minimum day” sessions in which classes end by 12:30 p.m. This schedule change allows for coaching and professional development time to take place within teachers’ contract hours.

**Scoring Calibration**

In order to score fairly and consistently across the senior defenses, Hillsdale teachers participate in scoring calibration training as part of their professional development sessions in November and January. During these dedicated times, teachers align their rubric scoring practices. They also calibrate department questions and expectations for portfolio and application tasks. For any given defense, the teachers who serve on the panel spend time together deliberating on whether the student will pass their defense, using the defense rubric. This alignment across two judges is a form of real-time calibration. In order to increase reliability of scoring, coaches are not assigned to be part of their own students’ defense panels.

**How Students Benefit**

The graduate portfolio and defense serve as key elements of fulfilling Hillsdale’s mission, and embody the school’s four cornerstones of equity, personalization, rigor, and shared decision making. Hillsdale students show strong learning outcomes (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Hillsdale High School Student Outcomes (2016–2017)**

	Hillsdale Average	State Average
<b>California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress</b>	<b>11th-Grade ELA:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 74% standard met or exceeded</li> <li>• 14% standard nearly met</li> <li>• 12% standard not met</li> </ul>	<b>11th-Grade ELA:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 60% standard met or exceeded</li> <li>• 21% standard nearly met</li> <li>• 19% standard not met</li> </ul>
	<b>11th-Grade Mathematics:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 58% standard met or exceeded</li> <li>• 21% standard nearly met</li> <li>• 21% standard not met</li> </ul>	<b>11th-Grade Mathematics:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 32% standard met or exceeded</li> <li>• 24% standard nearly met</li> <li>• 44% standard not met</li> </ul>
<b>4-Year Cohort Graduation Rate</b>	<b>92%</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asian or Filipino: 95%<sup>a</sup></li> <li>• Latino: 85%</li> <li>• White: 95%</li> <li>• African American: Not reported<sup>b</sup></li> </ul>	<b>83%</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asian, Filipino, or Pacific Islander: 93%</li> <li>• Latino: 80%</li> <li>• White: 87%</li> <li>• African American: 73%</li> </ul>
<b>A–G Course Requirements for UC/CSU Admission</b>	<b>54%</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asian or Filipino: 68%<sup>a</sup></li> <li>• Latino: 35%</li> <li>• White: 58%</li> <li>• African American: Not reported<sup>b</sup></li> </ul>	<b>41%</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asian, Filipino, or Pacific Islander: 67%</li> <li>• Latino: 34%</li> <li>• White: 48%</li> <li>• African American: 29%</li> </ul>

<sup>a</sup> Because the senior class had 10 or fewer Pacific Islanders, the data for this group were not reported due to confidentiality concerns.  
<sup>b</sup> Because the senior class had 10 or fewer African American students, the data for this group were not reported due to confidentiality concerns.  
Source: California Department of Education DataQuest.

Although the performance assessment process is just one element of the school’s academic program, it is an important experience that helps steer students toward success. A 2017 report from the Stanford Center on Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE) explains how the defense process prepares students for college:

[An] administrator shared a story that a parent told at a recent school board meeting. The parent’s daughter had graduated from Hillsdale and was a freshman at the University of California where, in one of her classes, she was required to do an oral presentation. The board member reported that the professor singled her daughter out and said to the class: “‘This is for everybody who wants to see what an oral presentation looks like, this is what you should be doing.’ He took her aside, said, ‘How did you develop those skills?’ She’s like, ‘That’s what you do in high school.’” The administrator added, “That’s rewarding and that doesn’t show up in anything, but kids do say this. They come back and say, ‘We know how to interact with our professors, we know how to give presentations, we know how to cite evidence.’”<sup>2</sup>

In addition to these academic outcomes, Hillsdale students derive social-emotional benefits from the performance assessment process. For example, students are frequently prompted to reflect on their learning and growth while constructing their portfolios and presenting their defenses. During the defense, if panelists need further detail or specific examples, they can ask follow-up questions. As with questions focused on academic content, these metacognition questions are developed by Hillsdale staff in advance of the defense (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7. Sample Metacognition Questions for Defense**

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- What have you learned about yourself through this defense and/or coaching process?

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  - How might the skills/knowledge you have gained through the defense help you in your postsecondary life?

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  - What are some specific steps that you need to take in order to continue to grow in any graduate profile categories that you currently struggle with?

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  - How effective do you feel your goal-setting has been over the course of your years at HHS? What are some examples of goals that you formally set and successfully met?

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This emphasis on self-reflection and self-assessment extends beyond the portfolio and defense. In their advisory class, students use the rubrics and reflections to assess their progress on the graduate profile and state standards. They then explain their progress, achievement, and goals for each class to family members during Student/Parent/Advisor Conferences, which occur 6 weeks into the first semester every year.

One Hillsdale teacher shared his observations of students’ growth with the portfolio and defense process:

I have observed, through coaching, a student overcome his fear of public speaking with thorough preparation and then go on to confidently pass the defense. Another special education student was able to convey his subject matter knowledge orally in a way he could never do in writing, and another student who, through the defense process, was able to find new subject matter connections and understandings. Students have also, in general, been excellent about helping to coach each other through the process, and teachers have enjoyed and benefited from coaching.

Hillsdale’s portfolio and defense system demonstrates that performance assessments can successfully take place in a large public high school. Grounded in equity, rigor, personalization, and shared decision making, this model equips students with the skills they need to succeed in higher education and the workplace.

## Next Steps

Hillsdale’s performance assessment system has changed over the years in order to fine tune the learning process for students. The system described in this profile, which was implemented during the 2017–18 school year, will continue to evolve during the 2018–19 school year. Hillsdale staff plan to introduce **senior projects** as part of the portfolio process, which involve original student research, creative work, academic analyses, or community problem solving. The senior project is grounded in academic content and will serve as a culminating task to add to the 12th-grade portfolio, showcasing each student’s expertise in their chosen area of focus. This change represents an attempt to draw upon “the best of a lot of different things we’ve done,” according to Principal Jeff Gilbert. The senior project bears some resemblance to the senior exhibition paper and the senior mastery paper that were part of previous iterations of Hillsdale’s performance assessment system. However, Gilbert describes the current approach as “more creative, more focused on social-action content that students are choosing, and more personal.”

The addition of a senior project to the student portfolios took into account feedback from the entire school community. After conducting surveys, interviews, and student meetings, the Hillsdale faculty voted strongly to keep the current elements of the system in place—including the portfolio entries, reflection process, application task, and defense—while adding the senior project. The process will balance the benefits that students derive from taking ownership of a project they designed with deep connections to core content with the powerful learning experience they get from documenting their progress over time while building a portfolio.

Staff members are currently developing and refining a process by which they can manage and monitor these projects and mentor students. Each content area team (English language arts, mathematics, etc.) has identified three to four project categories for students who choose to develop a project in that area. Every project, regardless of content area, needs to involve writing and draw upon outside sources of information. Students will work with a coach within their chosen content area to support their project development. Hillsdale students and staff look forward to testing out and refining this new process.

Hillsdale’s performance assessment system may continue to evolve over time, but the rich learning opportunities for students remain constant. The graduate portfolio and defense empowers students to design, document, reflect on, and present their learning in a manner that prepares them for success in college and career.

## Endnotes

1. Bae, S. (2017). *It’s About Time: Organizing Schools for Teacher Collaboration and Learning*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.
2. Bae, S. (2017). *It’s About Time: Organizing Schools for Teacher Collaboration and Learning*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.