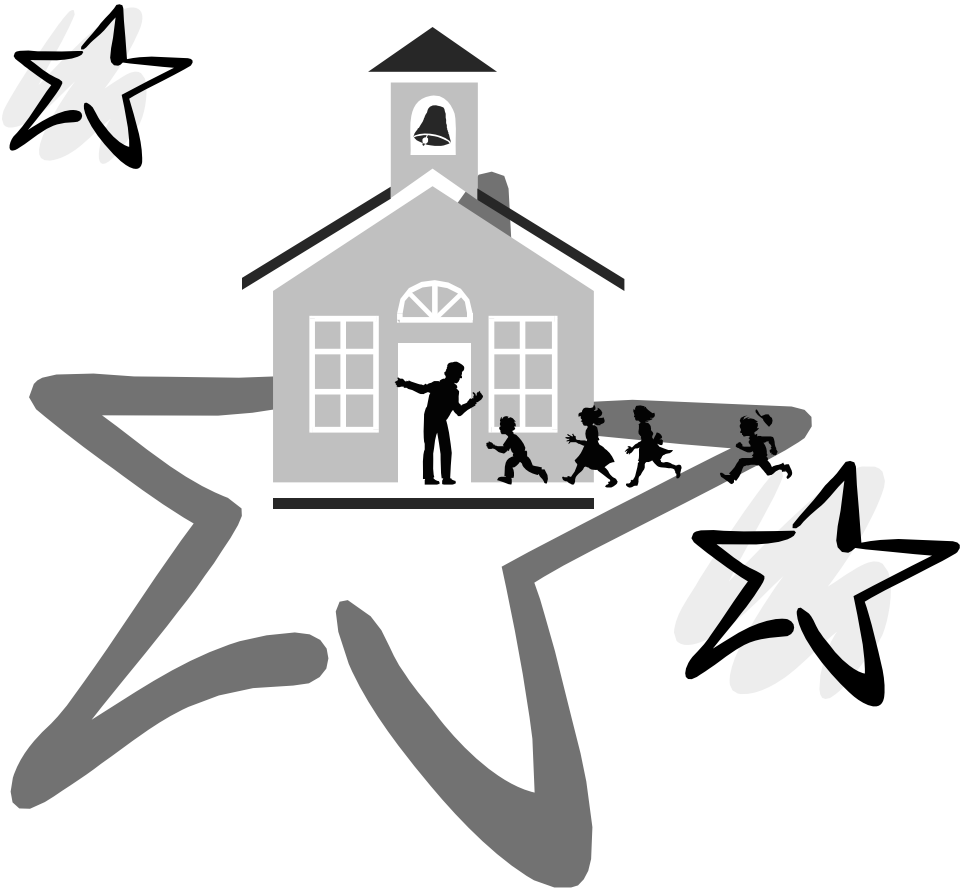
Charting STARS:

Sustainability as Challenge and Opportunity



Year Two Report
Research Study and Comprehensive Evaluation of Nebraska's School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System

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Abbreviations

CRT (CRA): Criterion-Referenced Test (Criterion-Referenced Assessment)

ELL: English Language Learners

ESU: Educational Service Unit

NDE: Nebraska Department of Education

NRT (NRA): Norm-Referenced Test (Norm-Referenced Assessment)

QC: Quality Criteria

SAA: Standards, Assessment, and Accountability

SPED: Special Education

STARS: School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System

SWA: Statewide Writing Assessment

TCI: Teachers College Institute (University of Nebraska-Lincoln)

UNL: University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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Year Two Report

STARS Comprehensive Evaluation Project

Executive Summary

This second annual report of the Comprehensive Evaluation Project (CEP) provides analyses of four crucial areas of Nebraska's School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS):

- The standards, assessment, and accountability (SAA) process in schools
- curriculum and instruction under STARS
- School leadership under STARS
- Professional development under STARS

Our data are drawn from sets of interviews with teachers, assessment coordinators, and administrators in 23 schools located in 15 districts, as well as two large mail surveys. In all, we conducted 73 interviews and sent over 1200 questionnaires for this year's study.

The subtitle of last year's report was "the state of assessment in the state of Nebraska." In that document, as our terminology suggested, we attempted to create a snapshot of STARS in that moment in time. This year's subtitle – "sustainability as opportunity and challenge" – is similarly indicative of our overarching aim: we wish to identify the opportunities and challenges facing Nebraska educators as they work toward creating sustainable state and local SAA processes. If last year's report was a snapshot, this year's is a moving picture.

As one would expect, this moving picture is complex. Indeed, the news about STARS is mixed. There are, first of all, unmistakable signs of progress, such as

- movement toward more integrative (cross-curricular and cross-grade) SAA processes
- more focused, data-informed, and better articulated curriculum and instruction
- more teacher "buy-in" and leadership than ever before
- a strong focus on assessment literacy in widely-available professional development

But there are also serious challenges and obstacles, including

- insufficient time for educators to meet the myriad demands placed on them
- continuing, sometimes intensifying, frustration and resentment among some educators
- political pressure resulting from district and school comparisons, which are perceived by educators to be unfair and inaccurate
- growing concerns about the reliability and validity of the state's accountability system

It is thus too early to say whether or not STARS and the local SAA processes we have examined are sustainable in the long run. However, in examining each area outlined above – the SAA process, curriculum and instruction, leadership, and professional development – we do offer

1) an *emerging portrait*, which identifies trends in that area
2) an examination of *continuing challenges* in that area
3) a discussion of *hallmarks of effective work* in that area

We also offer a series of *recommendations*, addressed to the Nebraska Department of Education. However, this report should be of use to educators as well as policymakers; we urge NDE to distribute it widely and to use it as a discussion piece in its ongoing work with the state's educators.

Our findings and recommendations are as follows:

Chapter 1: Standards, Assessment, and Accountability (SAA) Processes in Schools

An Emerging Portrait

Charting Progress

In most schools, the SAA process is becoming more manageable.
In most schools, the SAA process is becoming more data-informed.
In more schools, the SAA process is becoming teacher-involved and teacher-led.
In more schools, the SAA process is being viewed as **ongoing**.
In more schools, the SAA process is integrating assessment, instruction, and curriculum.
In more schools, the SAA process is becoming cross-grade and cross-curricular.

Gauging Attitudes

Many educators remain resentful and frustrated about several features of the state and local SAA processes.
Educators are "buying in" to SAA where the benefits are becoming apparent.
Many educators are fearful about the ramifications of federal legislation on state and local SAA efforts.
Some educators question the validity of a system that allows different assessments in different districts.
Positions in favor of and opposing Nebraska's approach to SAA are intensifying.

C) Identifying Benefits

1) Collegial dialogue and collaboration
2) Curriculum improvement
3) Student learning
4) Self-scrutiny and accountability
5) Flexibility and local discretion

Continuing Challenges

1) **Time**
2) Paperwork

3) Comparisons and competition
4) Constant changes
5) Separation of assessment and instruction
6) Burden on reporting-grade teachers
7) Unhealthy partnerships
8) Noninvolvement of communities
9) Disproportionate impact on small, rural schools and communities
10) Alienation of teachers in larger schools/districts

Hallmarks of Effective Standards, Assessment, and Accountability Processes

1) They are built for sustainability.
2) They are holistic, integrating assessment, instruction, and curriculum under the umbrella of school improvement.
3) They are facilitated by strong, focused, shared leadership.
4) They embed professional development and capacity-building into the everyday practices of the school.
5) They promote and sustain cross-grade and cross-curricular systems thinking.
6) They place **local** values and needs first in the hierarchy of responsibilities.
7) They promote and sustain significant teacher ownership.
8) They promote and sustain significant community engagement.
9) They promote and sustain a culture of learning.
10) They are informed by relevant, accurate data, but are not driven by them.

Chapter 2: Curriculum and Instruction Under STARS

An Emerging Portrait

A. Curriculum

1) In most schools, the curriculum has been focused, but not drastically changed.
2) In more schools, the curriculum is becoming articulated k-12.
3) In more schools, the curriculum is becoming more integrative.
4) In more schools, literacy is becoming an area of intensified focus.
5) In some schools, teachers are "teaching to a test" that does not match their curriculum.
6) In some schools, unique and innovative curricula are being sacrificed for expediency.

B. Instruction

1) In many schools, teachers are individualizing instruction, but not drastically changing it.
2) In more schools, instruction and assessment are being integrated.
3) In more schools, teachers are expecting more from their students.
4) In more schools, students are being involved in the assessment process.
5) In more schools, instruction is intensely task-oriented.
6) Teachers believe SAA, and particularly standards, give them focus and direction.
7) Teachers continue to express support for six-trait writing, but they voice a range of concerns about the statewide writing test.
8) Teachers are split on whether their SAA process will improve student achievement (scores), but many cite learning gains.

9) Teachers continue to feel that too much instructional time is being sacrificed to assessment.

Continuing Challenges: Curriculum and Instruction

1) **Time**
2) Too much testing
3) Testing drives curriculum and instruction
4) Student motivation
5) Teacher motivation

Chapter 3: School Leadership Under STARS

An Emerging Portrait

- *General trends in school leadership in Nebraska*

1) Teachers are becoming leaders in the SAA process.
2) Leaders are making the SAA process locally meaningful, not just fulfilling a mandate from the state.
3) Leaders are struggling to keep morale high in a time of many challenges.
4) Administrators are learning new roles and developing new capacities.

- *Roles and Models of Leadership in Nebraska*

1) **Supporter/Coach/Cheerleader**: facilitative leadership
2) **Team member**: shared leadership
3) **Delegator**: distributive leadership
4) **Buffer**: centralized leadership
5) **Manager**: centralized leadership

➢ School leaders in Nebraska are moving away from the final two categories and toward one or more of the first three.

- *Leadership qualities, capacities, or principles cited by school leaders*

1) Vision
2) Commitment to local needs and values
3) Patience/perseverance
4) Team-building skills
5) Trust
6) A Consistent Role

Continuing Challenges

1) Time
2) Recordkeeping/paperwork
3) Keeping staff motivated
4) Constant change
5) A school culture of parochialism

Hallmarks of Effective School Leaders

1) They understand the hallmarks of effective school improvement processes.
2) They develop specific strategies to enact that school improvement vision.
3) They seek to integrate their own vision and those of their colleagues.
4) They honor resistance without indulging it.
5) They are learners.
6) They are accountable.
7) They develop a distinct and consistent role.
8) They use resources sustainably.

Chapter 4: Professional Development Under STARS

An Emerging Portrait

1) A variety of SAA-related professional development opportunities are available to Nebraska educators.
2) Schools and districts are extremely supportive of educators' ongoing professional development.
3) Assessment literacy continues to be an area of focus.
4) Professional development is becoming more collaborative.
5) Professional development is starting to become embedded in school life.
6) External professional development remains largely uncoordinated.

Continuing Challenges

1) Time
2) Deeply individualistic school culture
3) Pre-packaged external professional development
4) Money

Hallmarks of Effective Professional Development (for SAA)

1) It is focused on **sustainability.**
2) It contributes to a culture of learning.
3) It is cross-grade and cross-curricular.
4) It models good instructional practice.
5) It is embedded (or embeddable) in an ongoing SAA process.
6) It is data-informed, but not data-driven.
7) It is inquiry-based and interactive.
8) It focuses on **why**, as well as what and how.

Chapter 5: Recommendations

- Educators report that they need:
    - *time* to fulfill their SAA responsibilities
    - "more realistic" reporting requirements from the state
    - clear, focused, and timely communication from the state

- state and community responsiveness to local realities and challenges
- a stable state SAA system
- detailed guidance, including concrete examples, on how to improve their local SAA system
- continued financial and moral support to continue their work on SAA
- less political pressure as a result of competition and unfair comparisons

- Areas needing continued attention:
  - developing cross-grade and cross-curricular SAA processes
  - integrating of assessment and instruction
  - assessment literacy among educators
  - broader stakeholder engagement (including parents and communities)
  - the unique challenges of small schools

- Bottom-line requirements for the sustainability of STARS:
  - a reasonable timetable, with any changed introduced carefully and incrementally
  - clear, focused, and timely communication with schools and districts
  - high-quality university preservice programs
  - high-quality state-sponsored professional development
  - investment in local educators (resources for ongoing professional development)

- Year Two Recommendations:

1) Continue to make adjustments, but not drastic changes
2) Simplify reporting process:
   - allow for reporting on fewer standards
   - streamline portfolio requirements
   - fold new reporting requirements, whenever possible, into existing reporting activities
   - develop a user-friendly, online reporting template
   - circulate models of streamlined data reporting models
3) Focus professional development offerings on areas of special need
   - Quality criteria 5 and 6
   - Using existing curriculum and instruction to meet state standards
   - Models of effective SAA processes
   - Engaging communities
4) Move toward a more complex, rigorous, and authentic writing assessment
5) Sponsor a state “leaders of learning” council
6) Examine the validity and reliability of the accountability system
7) Commission an audit of the involvement of Educational Services Units in STARS
8) Help all schools, but especially small and rural schools, protect and enhance locally-meaningful education
9) Adjust/amplify the message
   - Local decision-making is right for Nebraska
   - Unfair and inappropriate comparisons must be avoided
   - NCLB will not undermine the work already completed on underway in Nebraska
   - STARS does not require **more testing**

Introduction

This is the second annual report of the Comprehensive Evaluation Project (CEP), an independent evaluation of Nebraska's School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS). The CEP was contracted between the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) Teachers College Institute (TCI) in Fall 2001. TCI in turn contracted Dr. Chris Gallagher (Associate Professor, English) to serve as Coordinator and Principal Investigator of the project. The CEP is jointly supported by NDE, TCI, and UNL's College of Arts and Sciences.

The Study

The principal purpose of the CEP is to monitor and evaluate the state's standards, assessment, and accountability system. This project is particularly important in the present climate for several reasons:

- STARS is still a relatively new system, having been brought online in 2000
- the state is working to negotiate sweeping federal educational reform initiatives into this still evolving system
- schools are meeting an array of new challenges, not least of which is the need to move toward data-informed school improvement processes
- teacher educators are responding to and shaping all of the above changes
- universities are attempting to forge alliances with the pre-K-12 sector to protect and enhance public education in the midst of a budgetary crisis.

Our year one report – *Charting STARS: The State of Assessment in the State of Nebraska* – was submitted to Doug Christensen, Commissioner of Education, on August 1, 2002. It included chapters on the District Assessment Portfolio process, the statewide writing assessment, language arts assessment, and leadership. The report drew on interviews and surveys conducted with educators[1] around the state, and included a number of policy and procedural recommendations (see Executive Summary, Appendix I). It has had a significant impact on several stakeholders:

- NDE has used it to create a Strategic Action Plan (Appendix K)
- UNL's Teachers College has used our research to inform and improve initial certification programs; to shape their assessment cohort program; and to guide allied research projects (including seven dissertations completed or underway)
- research participants have used this project as a vehicle for gaining a voice in state and local policymaking and for placing their own work in perspective
- Nebraska researchers have used data from this study to inform the national research community about Nebraska's unique system (this includes four articles in the education journal *Phi Delta Kappan*, as well as several presentations at academic conferences).

[1] Throughout this report, we will use the term "educator" as an umbrella term for both teachers and school administrators.

Our year two study builds on the data collected in year one. Operating under a reauthorization of our initial UNL Institutional Review Board approval (see Appendix A), we have held ourselves to a set of principles we designed at the outset:

- The study must give voice to those "in the field" (teachers and school administrators).
- The study must dispassionately and rigorously evaluate both the strengths and the limitations of STARS.
- The study must unfold in multiple stages.
- The study must cast a wide but carefully targeted research net.
- The study must employ multiple research methods.

We have continued to mix quantitative and qualitative research methods, bringing our two-year totals to almost 300 educators interviewed and over 3000 educators surveyed. As we did last year, we have employed both random and stratified sampling, as suits our research objectives. Also, we have continued to conduct observational research, attending dozens of workshops, presentations, and meetings.

However, we did institute several changes to our procedures in year two. First, we streamlined the administration of the project, reducing the number of principal investigators from two to one and the number of secondary investigators in the field from four to two. At the same time, we hired an administrative assistant to assist with mailings, survey formatting, correspondence, transcriptions, and so forth. We also relied much more heavily on consultants, including an expanded advisory committee (see Appendix C) as well as statistics expert Dr. William Mickelson and the Nebraska Evaluation and Research Center in UNL's Teachers College. These changes have allowed us to develop more rigorous sampling plans and research instruments.

A final addition to the project is worthy of mention, though it does not appear in this year's report. We have undertaken a collaborative effort with the Buros Center for Testing (UNL) to examine the ability of norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests to classify student performance into four categories (see Appendix H). This sufficiency study is underway, and results will be available in our year three report.

Overview

This year's study consisted of interviews with teachers, assessment coordinators, and administrators in 23 schools located in 15 districts, as well as two large mail surveys. (See Appendix D for a detailed description of methodology and Appendix E for copies of the research instruments.) For the interviews, the unit of analysis was the school building; we wanted to learn about the following areas as they are being experienced and perceived in each school:

- The standards, assessment, and accountability (SAA) process in schools
- Curriculum and instruction under STARS
- School leadership under STARS
- Professional development under STARS

These topics provide the organizing structure for this report.

The surveys, meanwhile, were aimed at writing and mathematics teachers, and they focus primarily on classroom practices and teachers' perceptions of assessment (though they also touched on related areas such as professional development). Survey findings are incorporated

throughout this report; a detailed analysis of the results of each survey can be found in Appendices F and G.

Together, the interviews and surveys give us a simultaneously broad and detailed look at key issues related to STARS and local SAA processes. Using multiple research methods and data sources also enhances the validity of our findings.

Each chapter has three main sections:

1) *An Emerging Portrait*. In these sections, we describe trends in each area (the SAA process, curriculum and instruction, leadership, professional development), offering a broad-stroke portrait of where many schools are headed.

2) *Continuing Challenges*. In these sections, we describe ongoing difficulties faced by educators in each area.

3) *Hallmarks of Effective*…. In these sections, we describe essential features of effective work in each area. These hallmarks are not drawn from the professional literature, though we suspect one could find support (and perhaps refutation) for them there. Rather, they are based on our observations and the testimony of study participants. These sections are intended to be discussion pieces, not blueprints or manifestos. We hope NDE staff and local educators use them to spur conversation and goal setting.

We have developed this report with a variety of potential audiences in mind – including NDE staff, policymakers, teachers, administrators, teacher educators, ESU staff, and other educational stakeholders. Thus, we present our findings in non-technical, jargon-free prose.

A Key Question: Is It Sustainable?

Nebraska has chosen a unique path to standards, assessment, and accountability, eschewing the kind of high-stakes, standardized state testing that we see in almost all other states in favor of a more flexible system that preserves local discretion while holding schools to the same assessment quality and student performance standards. (See our year one report for a broad overview of STARS). At present, it has won provisional and general approval from the federal government to proceed with its plan. But the state is clearly blazing its own path in the area of SAA, and it faces many serious challenges and questions.

Thus, STARS is, it seems fair to say, a political football. It faces considerable external pressure from a federal government that favors educational standardization and centralization and internal pressure from skeptical media outlets as well as politicians and beleaguered teachers. Further, it is charged with helping to ensure equitable education for all Nebraska students in the context of a state budget crisis, which has prompted considerable education cuts and a controversial revision of the state's school aid formula. At the same time, STARS has won support from a wide array of stakeholders, including many educators, legislators, state school board members, and private citizens. One need only review the transcription of the legislative Committee on Education hearing on LB778 (March 4, 2003) – which proposed to institute a state test – to understand the warm support STARS has won among its vocal proponents.[2]

[2] One teacher testified at the hearing that "STARS is the best school improvement/teacher improvement process I've even seen in my years of education." Another agreed: "Twenty-five years as an educators and I have not seen anything this exciting come out." No proponents of the proposed bill spoke at the hearing.

As Nebraska pioneers its own path, it is avoiding the most egregious problems befalling high-stakes standardized testing states: testing companies making serious errors in test design and reporting, teachers leaving the profession as a result of political fallout or engaging in ethically corrupt practices to keep test scores high, children experiencing debilitating test anxiety, and so on. However, Nebraska's unique standards, assessment, and accountability system generates its own sets of promises and perils. Indeed, in each focus area in this report we see signs of progress as well as continuing challenges.

Among the most important signs of progress, we count:

- movement toward more integrative (cross-curricular and cross-grade) SAA processes
- more focused, data-informed, and better articulated curriculum and instruction
- more teacher "buy-in" and teacher leadership than ever before
- a strong focus on assessment literacy in widely-available professional development

By the same token, the continuing challenges are serious. They include:

- insufficient time for educators to meet the myriad demands placed on them
- continuing, sometimes intensifying, frustration and resentment among some educators
- political pressure resulting from district and school comparisons, which are perceived by educators to be unfair and inaccurate
- growing concerns about the reliability and validity of the state's accountability system

It is not going too far to suggest that education in Nebraska stands at a crossroads. A key question facing both state and local educators is this: Are the programs and processes being developed in Nebraska *sustainable*?

Sustainability is an ecological concept; it involves "meeting today's needs without jeopardizing the well-being of future generations."[3] Sustainability is not simply about surviving; it is about thriving. It "addresses how particular initiatives can be developed without compromising the development of others in the surrounding environment, now and in the future."[4] In a school context, sustainability requires protecting and enhancing healthy features of one's environment, jettisoning unhealthy features, and planning for continuity and future success.

It is too early to say whether STARS or local SAA processes are sustainable. The state system has produced some good results, and it has run into some serious problems. If the challenges listed above (and others detailed in this report) continue to block the way toward progress, the system will become another historical curiosity on the long road of failed school reforms. On the other hand, the signs of progress are real; if they can be capitalized upon, STARS stands a chance of revolutionizing standards, assessment, and accountability.

Acknowledgments
We wish to thank the following:

- the educators whose voices you hear in this study, who so generously gave of their time (which is in short supply) and insight (which is abundant)

[3] Derek Owens, *Composition and Sustainability*. (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2001), p. 1.
[4] Andy Hargeaves and Dean Fink, "Sustaining Leadership," *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 84, 2003, p. 694.

- NDE staff, including Doug Christensen, Jackie Naber, and Pat Roschewski, who have been unwaveringly supportive and helpful

- our advisory committee (listed in Appendix C), who lent their invaluable expertise

- our supporters in UNL's Teachers College, including Ardis Holland, Bill Mickelson, Dean James O'Hanlon, Michael Toland at the NEAR Center, Associate Dean Jim Walter, and Director of TCI Ali Moeller

- our supporters in UNL's College of Arts and Sciences, including Dean Richard Hoffmann, Chair of English Linda Pratt, and Linda Rossiter

- Maureen Gallagher, for her last-minute help with transcriptions

The extremely able researchers for this year's study were Katya Koubek, Eric Turley, and Susan Wilson (see Appendix B). Thanks to them for their hard work and insights. Susan Wilson has also provided essential administrative supportive throughout this year's study. The analyses and views expressed in this report are heavily influenced by the thinking of these three professionals. I try to honor that influence by using the first-person plural pronoun "we" throughout. However, I take full responsibility for the contents of this report. --CG

The data from this study – including blinded interview transcripts and survey results – are available by request from Dr. Chris Gallagher, 202 Andrews Hall, University of

Chapter 1
Standards, Assessment, and Accountability Processes in Schools

Our diverse sample yielded a wide variety of approaches to, experiences with, knowledge about, and attitudes toward STARS. Some participants – including a surprisingly high number of teachers – did not know what STARS is; others lived and breathed it. Some schools had been working on SAA for several years; others had just begun. Some individual schools had assessment coordinators, while other whole districts did not. In some schools, the district (or sometimes the ESU) developed, scored, and reported assessments, while teachers only administered them. In others, teachers developed, administered, scored, and reported assessments from their building. In some schools, a single, criterion-referenced test was used for the bulk of reporting for STARS; in others, multiple assessments were used. No two schools, it seems, are responding to STARS in quite the same way.

Whether or not participants were knowledgeable about STARS, we focused our interviews on "the standards, assessment, and accountability (SAA) process" as it was playing out in their school. We spoke to language arts teachers about "the language arts assessments" and to mathematics teachers about "the mathematics assessments." (We discussed assessment overall with administrators and assessment teams/coordinators.) Thus, when teachers speak of "the assessments" in this report, they are referencing different sets of assessments (since schools use different assessments). However, our aim was to learn about the SAA *process*, irrespective of the specific assessments used as part of that process.

When we isolate the story of the SAA process unfolding in schools, an emerging portrait begins to come into focus. We group our findings in this section under three categories: charting progress, gauging perceptions, and identifying benefits. We then examine some continuing challenges for schools as they develop their SAA processes. Finally, we end the chapter with a tentative examination of hallmarks of effective SAA processes.

An Emerging Portrait

Charting Progress

1) *In most schools, the SAA process is becoming more manageable.* Participants across the diverse schools we visited reported higher school capacity, increased assessment knowledge among administrators and teachers, and a growing familiarity with the demands of STARS. These trends translated into an increasingly manageable SAA process. The following process description may be more positive than most, but it does represent the general trend in many schools:

> [W]e've learned that it's easier than we thought it was going to be. You know, when we first had to do [this] we were going, 'Oh my gosh, how am I going to…fit all these standards into my lessons?' And as you went along, you found that you did it anyway. You're just having to…account for it now.

Although this sentiment was tempered by educator's frustration with constant changes to the state and local SAA processes, participants in several schools echoed this realization that the SAA process mostly involves "putting on paper" what teachers are already doing.

2) *In most schools, the SAA process is becoming more data-informed*. Although educators continued to experience difficulties with managing, interpreting, and using data, most participants indicated that they were becoming more skilled at using data to make instructional and curricular decisions. In many schools, this change constituted what one assessment coordinator called a "paradigm shift." Indeed, few schools were generating and using data to inform school improvement in systematic ways before the advent of STARS. Now, however, it is not uncommon to hear SAA processes described this way:

> [in] each building the teachers are required to come up with school improvement goals based on whatever that data is [sic] indicating where our weakness are. And then they are evaluated by their principals based on that. And so that's been good because…we're [not] just saying, 'Oh everybody just figure out what you want to do. Now we are saying, 'Figure out what you want to do based on what we see are the weaknesses in the district.'

Teachers and administrators alike are involved in continuous data gathering, interpretation, and use. In larger districts, ESUs assist in running and interpreting data. This process is becoming integrated into the instruction and the SAA process in general, as this principal explained: "while we're doing it, we might as well make some good use of it…it's not going to be useless data; we need to have it as part of the instructional cycle, and not just a beginning and an end."

3) *In more schools, the SAA process is becoming teacher-involved and teacher-led.* Teachers generally reported having, and were reported to have, increasing responsibilities for SAA. (Our mathematics survey finds that teachers in larger school districts, however, are less likely to be involved in various aspects of their SAA process; see Appendix G.) As we discuss in Chapter 3, they are also taking the lead in the process, guiding decision-making. All but a handful of interviewees reported that STARS is, as it is purported to be, "school-based" and "teacher-led." Often, teams of teachers lead the process: "our school improvement team is made up of…teachers who have really bought into helping the school improve and continuing to move forward as a school. So the teachers are very, very much involved." There are decided exceptions, however. Some participants claimed that the SAA process was "district-based," "ESU-based," or "state-based" (one fourth-grade teacher called it "state-forced"). These teachers reported that the SAA process was "top-down" in their school/districts and claimed talk of teacher leadership was mere lip-service. On balance, though, the trend is toward more teacher involvement and leadership. Most participants described the leadership structure as "shared," "bottom-up," and "grassroots."

4) *In more schools, the SAA process is being viewed as* **ongoing**. Some schools, especially those in which SAA were tied school improvement early on, have viewed SAA as an ongoing process all along. Others are just coming to this understanding, typically

because the staff is acknowledging that STARS "is not going away" (a phrase we heard again and again, inflected with various emotions). One high school language arts teacher, for instance, discussed the importance of realizing that "[w]e're never going to be done with it because it is just the nature of the work. It is a process and so that's the way it is." An assessment coordinator in a different school told a similar story: "[T]here for a while everybody was feeling really stressed. We have to get all these assessments for all these classes and how are we going to do it for a year? Well, we finally decided you are not going to be able to do that in a year. You know, it is a process." We do find some skepticism about the longevity of Nebraska's unique system, but most schools now seem to be searching for continuity strategies and committing to the long view.

5) *In more schools, the SAA process is integrating assessment, instruction, and curriculum.* In last year's report, we expressed a concern about the dichotomy between teaching and assessment. We continue to see such a separation in several interviews this year, and so we list this concern under "continuing challenges" (see below). At the same time, we detect a moderate trend toward more integrated processes. One principal, for instance, said of the assessment program in his building, "we see it not as an end result, but as part of a process of teaching…part of the learning process." Another building administrator explained that in his school, they "have moved from taking two weeks out of the year and giving kids tests to looking at our curriculum and matching the components of the test to meet that curriculum." In fact, several of our study schools are in the process of breaking up and spreading out large assessments, so there is more of a "flow" to curriculum and instruction. This seems particularly true in language arts. One teacher said this of assessment in her school: "it's not just some random test that we are pulling off and saying, 'Here, now, you have to do this.' It is directly related to the class they're taking and I think it really it just fits right in with our student learning." Elsewhere, another language arts teacher noted that in her school, the whole SAA process began with a strong curriculum:

> We didn't change our curriculum and standards because our curriculum we consider to be sound to begin with. We found projects, ideas, things that we did within our curriculum already and found places where they met the standards. We didn't find it necessary to invent anything. We didn't find it necessary to contort or twist or… force what we teach to the standards or force the standards to what we teach.

In schools like this, assessment, instruction, and curriculum are all viewed as part of the same process; they are integrated into a seamless whole.

6) *In more schools, the SAA process is becoming cross-grade and cross-curricular.* Another concern we articulated last year was that reporting-grade and reporting-discipline teachers were held disproportionately (and sometimes exclusively) responsible for SAA. This concern remains, and we list it as a "continuing challenge" in this year's report (see below). However, we do see modest progress on this front, with more schools attempting to share the burden of SAA by spreading instructional and assessment responsibilities across grades and curricular areas. We explore this trend further in Chapter 2. For now, here are two principals in different districts talking about cross-grade and cross-curricular work, respectively:

> [W]e don't consider it here as four, eight, and 11. We consider this an issue that is K-12 and so it takes everyone working together. And so we have to constantly inform each other of things that are working, things that are not working.

> [W]e put the continuum out to all teachers and said, 'Ok now, we don't test in social studies and we don't test in consumer sciences and we don't test in shop, but look over the continuum and send me some information back on how you feel this relates to your curriculum.' And they are going, 'Oh wow, I teach this in family consumer sciences' and shop goes, 'We do measurement and we to this and we do that,' and this is why the assessment is important for all of us to understand.

Gauging Attitudes

1) *Many educators remain resentful and frustrated about several features of the state and local SAA processes*. Almost all participants in our study report ongoing frustration with some feature of STARS and/or the local SAA process. The most common and serious complaints revolved around the following:

   - Lack of time
   - Volume of paperwork
   - Too much testing (and too little teaching)
   - Unfair district and school comparisons
   - Politics trumping joy of learning

   We take up each of these items elsewhere in this report; here, we note that educators continue to struggle affectively with new and challenging demands. Even in schools in which participants reported high morale, we detected considerable unease and sometimes outright resentment at "all this standards and assessment stuff." The most extreme view in this regard held that politicians are ruining education, "robbing" students of the "joy of learning" with their narrow-minded focus on numbers and achievement.

2) *Educators are "buying in" to SAA where the benefits are becoming apparent.* Although we did not visit any schools in which frustration and resentment were altogether absent, we did hear about positive attitudinal trends in some schools – especially those where the benefits of SAA (discussed in the next section) are emerging. In some schools, participants described "turnarounds" in teacher attitudes, to the point that their work on SAA is becoming a "source of pride." By way of illustration, a superintendent described a local board meeting:

   > [W]e had a couple of teachers that came and let them know where we are at with curriculum and assessment and what is going on right now. And our board was just amazed at how impassioned our teachers are. They were like, 'Man, if I wasn't sitting here, I would have never believed that those two teachers, specifically, could get that excited about curriculum and assessment.' And it's been awesome to watch that take place. I mean you just don't mess with our teachers when it comes to this right now.

   In schools like this, the key to this shift is often a perception that the SAA process is paying off in the form of enhanced student learning. For instance, a math teacher in a large district said,

   > [I]t is exciting for me personally and professionally in this school to be having this kind of dialogue because when I first started here it was okay to be at the bottom

> of the barrel, and it was no big deal…And [now] at least we do have this dialogue and we have it as a team and we have it as a building because it is a measure of achievement and learning and…we're looking at helping our children, especially those from really tough areas, find…ways to being successful, happy, effective citizens.

Also promoting teacher buy-in is the realization that incorporating STARS and SAA generally into what they were already doing was not as difficult as educators had initially anticipated. Sometimes, though, the reason is simpler, as one principal explained: "it's taken us two years to get people on board with the understanding that we are going to do this and it's not going to go away and we need to look at it as not an add-on to your job but [as] part of your job."

3) *Many educators are fearful about the ramifications of federal legislation on state and local SAA efforts.* This finding is new to our study; we heard only faint rumblings about No Child Left Behind last year. But now that NCLB has been implemented, many educators in Nebraska are worried that new federal requirements will undermine or undo the significant work underway or already accomplished in this state.[5] One building administrator, who had just seen what he described as a major "turnaround" in his teachers' attitudes toward SAA, defended Nebraska's system: "I think the concept is great, and I like that we do it in the classroom…I hope Bush and Rod Paige don't force us to move away from it. And that's a quote." Teachers, too, are beginning to rise to the system's defense: "I'm not too excited about the possibility of Commissioner Paige…or Mr. Bush coming in here and telling us how we need to assess our kids because what works in Texas may not work in Nebraska." Exacerbating such fears is the skepticism several teachers expressed regarding the state's prospects of maintaining its current approach under federal pressure.

4) *Some educators question the validity of a system that allows different assessments in different districts*. As we will see below, some educators praised STARS for its flexibility and commitment to local discretion. Others, however, expressed skepticism about the results of the portfolio ratings because there is little consistency across districts in the assessments used to measure student performance. Many of these participants called this "comparing apples to oranges." (See also the results of our mathematics survey in Appendix G.) Although some of these participants understood that STARS is not intended to rank-order schools, they claimed it was "unrealistic" to expect the media and the public to eschew such comparisons. We should note that a smaller, but often vocal, group of educators expressed concerns about the *reliability* of the district ratings. (Though these complaints were far fewer than in last year's study.) The bulk of the concerns, however, revolved around validity.

5) *Positions in favor of **and** opposing Nebraska's approach to SAA are intensifying*. In last year's study, we found a pervasive tentativeness among educators – what we called a "wait and see" attitude. This year, we find movement away from this moderate position, and toward either support for or opposition to STARS. On the one side, as we have just seen, we have those educators who are beginning to see the benefits of their SAA efforts,

[5] This concern is a major theme of the legislative hearing on proposed LB778, which we refer to in the introduction. The announced purpose of the proposed bill was to move the state toward the NCLB mandates, and those are precisely the grounds on which many opponents staked their arguments. That is, proponents generally argued that STARS is far superior to what is envisaged in the federal legislation.

and who want to see Nebraska's system prevail in the face of what they perceive as federal intrusion. They value the flexibility of STARS, and wish to preserve local discretion. On the other hand, we have staunch opponents of the system, who resent the demands on their time, are frustrated by a system that compares "apples and oranges," and simply disagree in principle with the approach Nebraska has chosen. To illustrate this chasm, we offer two contrasting views:

> [The SAA process has] helped me sharpen in my own mind the goals, the things I'm trying to do, so that I stay focused and on task a lot better…I think it is good and I think it helps us to be more professional. Teachers are sometimes not regarded too highly and I think this gives us a way to say, 'But look, we do very good work,' and that is important.

> [A] lot of my time is going to the testing, which I resent because I entered this profession many years ago to challenge minds and make them think…but you're spending too much time doing the paper work for some body else.

What is striking about these views is that they come from colleagues teaching in the same high school. Even more striking is the passion with which many educators offer their opinions about STARS. Consider, for instance, this memorable condemnation:

> [T]his is the worst thing I've seen happen in my 38 years, and I don't think its coming from educators. I think that the whole education system has been hijacked as surely as the Taliban hijacked Islam.[6]

Among opponents such as this, we see a growing number single state test advocates. They may wish to see a system in which comparability is paramount. Or they may believe a state test would mean less state intrusion on their classroom time. Most often, they are simply overwhelmed by the complexity of STARS, and want something simpler.

Identifying Benefits

1) *Collegial dialogue and collaboration.* Almost all participants credited the SAA process with bringing the school staff together for genuine dialogue and collaborative work, often for the first time in teachers' memories.[7] Now, they told us, everyone is "working for a common goal" and "speaking the same language." Educators are part of "an intense professional conversation," as the following comments, from educators in different schools, demonstrate:

> [T]hat networking, that bonding, that sharing [of] ideas has been a benefit and has helped me as a teacher.

> [Y]ou see teachers having more conversations about curriculum and instruction and assessment than ever before – and I have been a teacher for a number of years…[before, e]verybody did their own little thing you know you went in your

[6] Readers may wish to compare this statement with those made at the legislative hearing on proposed LB778. As we noted in the introduction, some educators claimed there that STARS is the *best* thing to happen to education in many years. This contrast supports our contention that we are seeing polarization.
[7] Although one math teacher put a negative spin on newfound collegial dialogue by noting that the big change in his building is that "we are grumbling more."

> room and you did it any way you chose as long as you covered basic things. And now teachers are working together, which to me is more equitable for kids
>
> One of the benefits to the assessments is that it gives our department a really great opportunity to work together and to share ideas and to make a better environment for the students.[8]

This is one of the most profound changes we observe in Nebraska schools. Once a bastion of isolation and individualism, the school is being transformed into a cooperative space.

2) *Curriculum Improvements.* Even participants who take a dim view of SAA in general indicated that their curriculum is stronger as a result of the SAA process. Specifically, they spoke of "filling gaps" and "eliminating redundancies," allowing for a more *focused* curriculum. In some cases, they also talked about aligning curriculum across grade levels and content areas. In general, teachers now view their classroom work as connected to the work undertaken in other classrooms – a new approach for many teachers. This sense of responsibility is both a pressure and an opportunity, to be sure, but most teachers see this shift as a positive one. We explore curriculum in more depth in Chapter 2.

3) *Student learning*. Educators reported that the SAA process allows them to teach more effectively by helping them 1) understand where their students are in their learning; 2) individualize instruction, and 3) develop appropriate strategies and programs for remediation and enrichment. In turn, students develop a shared language about learning, reflect on their own learning, and begin to self-assess. Some teachers reported having higher expectations for students as a result of SAA. And many educators spoke of making their SAA process "as student-based as possible," as one superintendent put it. Only a few participants reported higher student *achievement results*, but many see evidence of improved student *learning* in their classrooms. We explore instruction in more depth in Chapter 2.

4) *Self-scrutiny and accountability.* Some educators are coming to embrace the kind of self-assessment sponsored by the SAA process because they see that it leads to school improvement. A principal explained: "[T]he biggest benefit is it's always in the back of your mind that your school is improving. You know, your goal is that you're always better today than you were yesterday." Some participants made it clear that the kind of self-scrutiny promoted by STARS is a new, and mostly welcome, development: "It's just made us look at ourselves with a more critical eye…we've been complacent." Candid self-scrutiny is never easy, and many educators have been understandably slow to warm to it. Moreover, resentment at what is often perceived as state intrusion has not abated. However, more and more educators are coming to believe that "it's good for our schools to constantly assess and evaluate and to improve and change." A few even noted that this kind of work is a *sin qua non* of professionalism: "most other professional have a process for… evaluating your product, evaluating yourself, evaluating the way you do [things] – and that's all this is." One principal put the matter plainly when he said that the SAA process "has made us more professional." He noted that we know more than ever before about how children learn, and it is time to be accountable.

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[8] In one school we visited, teachers routinely visit one another's classrooms. This non-evaluative visitation practice is the backbone of the collegial atmosphere in this school. Teachers routinely consult each other and work together to promote student learning across content areas and grades.

5) *Flexibility and local discretion.* Although some educators experience their SAA process as "very inflexible," others claimed the "saving grace" in "all this standards and assessment stuff" is the opportunity to develop a process that suits their local place. Participants appreciate having "quite a bit of latitude in development," as one superintendent put it. A principal in a school and community with considerable challenges echoed this sentiment, noting that NDE, to its credit, has "said to us, 'We support you as long as you can demonstrate it's working.'" Many teachers also "like the ownership of being involved and guiding and deciding what the curriculum will be." Although we see what may be growing advocacy for a state test, we also see a growing and at present stronger contingent bent on preserving a system that honors the local: "[T]he STARS program has allowed us to…develop what we believe is the best for our kids. We are not being dictated to or mandated down to; we are being allowed to experiment." This comment comes from an administrator in a school with serious challenges (poverty, language barriers, high mobility). Here is an administrator in another school with similar challenges: "STARS allows individuality within our community…STARS allows a direction and a purpose but doesn't dictate how fast or how slow that purpose or direction needs to be." Teachers in those schools in our study facing the greatest challenges were consistently more positive about flexibility and local control than were their counterparts in less severely challenged schools.

Continuing Challenges

1) ***Time***. Like their counterparts in last year's study, participants in this year's study uniformly identified time as their most serious challenge. They talked about time in two ways. First, they reported that the sheer amount of time devoted to SAA is "enormous," "overwhelming," and even "ridiculous." They simply cannot find the time to meet the demands of the SAA process, and this often cuts into what little personal time they have. Second, they indicated that time spent on SAA interferes with time spent on instruction. (The high frequency of this latter complaint provides one index of how many schools continue to treat assessment and instruction as separate processes.) Even those educators who are fully committed to school improvement noted that time is their greatest challenge. One assessment administrator told us, for instance, that she struggles to get teachers enough time to become the kinds of leaders STARS promotes.

2) *Paperwork.* Again, this echoes a finding from last year's report: educators find the documentation and reporting stages of the SAA to be onerous. This is especially true of assessment coordinators and administrators who have responsibility for assembling the district assessment portfolio. They spoke of having to work with a "mountain of data." However, teachers also told us about spending large amounts of time documenting and reporting their classroom work (usually to an administrator or assessment coordinator). One teacher put it this way: "Going back to…day one for me as a teacher, [it has been] progressively more difficult to get everything done in a short period of time and, as a veteran teacher, I'm taking more and more and more piles of work home to do the assessments and record keeping. And it shouldn't be like that. I want to have enough time to spend one-on-one with my students." Another teacher claimed that "for every assessment you have to type several pages." Even supportive teachers complained about the paperwork: "I like the idea of standards and assessment. I just wish someone smarter than me would come up with an easier way of doing it." Very few schools and districts seem to have a streamlined, manageable documentation and reporting process.

3) *Comparisons and competition*. Most participants pointed to the media as the culprit in promoting unfair and inaccurate district and school comparisons. When newspapers print comparative results and rank-order schools, they do not account for context and they place districts, schools, educators, and students in a competitive rather than cooperative relationship. This pressure is only compounded by what educators perceive to be communities' lack of knowledge about and interest in the complexities of SAA and education generally. ("They just want numbers.") Educators pointed out that when they are placed in competition with other schools, they are more likely to emphasize raising their numbers, even to the detriment of genuine student learning. Those in schools with special circumstances are at a particular disadvantage when comparative numbers are used to judge school quality. For instance, a principal in a school with an extremely high mobility rate argued that "you cannot make us accountable for the education that students have had in other schools." Mobility, poverty, unemployment, lack of cultural capital – "those things," he noted, "make a difference…one size doesn't fit all." A principal elsewhere echoed this sentiment when he suggested that raw numbers do not acknowledge the language barriers, cultural barriers, economic barriers, and parental barriers his school faces every day. However, teachers in high-performance schools are hardly immune from this pressure; a teacher in a high-performing school, for instance, said that "because our school does do well in the district, the pressure is put on us to keep our scores up because they need our good scores to help get the average or the mean up."

4) *Constant changes*. Many participants complained that policymakers at the federal, state, and district levels continue to "move the target." Two related issues emerge here. First, educators are overwhelmed by new sets of responsibilities, always feeling "a step behind." Second, continuous change tends to undermine trust in the existing system. This is particularly poignant, as we suggest above, as Nebraska integrates the requirements of No Child Left Behind into its SAA system. As educators learn about new changes to reporting requirements (such as the Statewide Writing Assessment or AYP), they justly wonder: What will happen to all the work we have already done? Why do that work if we are moving toward a system that does not look like the one with which we began? One teacher told us, "my fear is that as it gets easier they will put something else on the plate or say, 'Oh wait a minute, just kidding about that. Let's try something new.' If you have any pull with the state department, caution them against doing that." And of course changes at the state level generate changes at the local level: ESUs, districts, and schools continue to adjust their SAA processes in ways that sometimes mystify educators.

5) *Separation of assessment and instruction*. We do see some improvement in this area, as we discuss above. However, this separation remains strong in many schools. As we suggested in last year's report, this dichotomy leads to several problems. When this separation reigns, assessments tend

- not to align with curriculum
- to be one-shot, end-of-unit events, taking time from instruction
- to be merely a documentation moment, not a learning opportunity
- to lead to too much testing

This last difficulty is clear in when we consider reports of a math teacher giving 29 tests in one year, a language arts teacher administering a pencil-and-paper test for six solid weeks, and another language arts teacher having eight tests for a single standard.

Under these conditions, the obvious tendency is to "teach to the test"; curriculum and instruction are driven by assessment, rather than the other way around.

6) *Burden on reporting-grade teachers.* This is another area where we have seen some, but not drastic, improvement. We still heard the sentiment, for instance, that "no one wants to be a fourth-grade teacher." One fourth-grade teacher communicated this idea in a (half-)joking response to our question about whether she saw any benefits of STARS: "job security, because we don't think that there is anybody else that is going to apply for the fourth-grade positions." We also note that fourth- and eighth-grade teachers in our study were more likely than their counterparts in other grades to support a state test. Even in a school where the conceptual shift to whole-school responsibility has begun, there are lingering difficulties, as one principal explained:

> [T]here's a lot of assessment in fourth grade, and they see that as their big responsibility. And I'm not sure they *really* believe that what happened in kindergarten, first, second, and third grade is a part of the whole picture. It's like, if these kids make it or not, whatever that assessment says in 4th grade, it's just their responsibility. And it's not; it's everything that's happened up to that point…[T]o understand that one teacher's failure in this building affects everybody is a place that I want them to take that step to. And I think assessment can help do that. But we're not – we're just not used to that.

7) *Unhealthy partnerships*. Although we saw some evidence of this in last year's study, it is much more pronounced among the schools we visited this year. Of particular concern is the small school with few resources and no assessment coordinator, where the obvious temptation is to consort with entities – other districts, an ESU – with greater resources and expertise. While this move can often be a positive one (see Appendix J), it also harbors potential dangers. In a couple of our study schools, a consortium or an ESU designs assessments that do not align with local curricula, and the teachers are frustrated. These teachers questioned the quality of the tests, indicated that data from the tests rarely return to the school in time to do anything useful with them, and noted that meaningful projects are being dropped in favor of "teaching to the test." (See Chapter 2 and Appendix G for more on the perceptions.)

8) *Noninvolvement of community.* Many educators talked to us about using assessment information to "break down" students' learning for parents. For instance, one teacher said, "you can put the paper in front of the parents and say, 'You know your student is struggling or your student is doing well, and here is the test results and that backs up what I see in the classroom as well as what they've done in the test.'" However, according to educators, at present communities, including parents, know little, and often care little, about what is going on in the schools generally. Most parents just want to know if their own child is doing well. Community members seem to take notice only when newspapers report assessment results, typically in comparative fashion. This tends to generate suspicion about the quality of the schools, and can often stand in for more meaningful community-school dialogue. In many cases, educators told us they have not done a good job of educating and involving the community. In other cases, they pointed to community apathy. Still other educators described particular challenges they face in high poverty and linguistically diverse environments. A principal in a high poverty community told us that "many of our families do not have the achievement language; they have the safety language." A principal in a community with a large Hispanic population similarly suggested that for many Hispanic parents, some of whom never went

to school themselves, "if their kid is in school, that's achievement alone." He also noted that there is no Spanish newspaper in town, and so many parents literally do not understand achievement results. But whatever the reason for poor school-community relations, it is clear that many teachers believe their job is made harder by the lack of parent knowledge/involvement and community support.

9) *Disproportionate impact on small, rural schools and communities*. It is not going too far to say that the challenges discussed above (and especially #8) endanger the sustainability of some small and rural communities.[9] If a rural community loses its school, it may well lose its center, its very lifeblood. In this context, STARS is both a threat and an opportunity. It is a threat because it places enormous pressure on resources, time, and expertise – all of which are often in short supply in small schools. Educators who have been involved in developing unique, place-based educational projects and programs report that they are moving away from that work in favor of more easily tested curriculum, despite anecdotal and empirical evidence supporting the value of place-based learning and community schools.[10] As one such administrator tells us, "it takes too much time to develop assessments to match those [place-based] projects." As a result, many electives are being cut in this recently consolidated district, and the school is not partnering as regularly with the community. At the same time, STARS represents an opportunity because it is flexible enough to allow schools to enhance what they are already doing well, rather than subjecting them to a one-size-fits-all system, thereby violating their uniqueness and ignoring their unique needs. At present, STARS seems to be functioning more as a threat than an opportunity in such communities. Although large and mid-sized schools are hardly immune from any of the challenges listed here, small schools are having a particularly difficult time managing the challenges posed by STARS.

10) *Alienation of teachers in larger schools/districts*. Teachers in larger schools were much more likely to report that they simply "do what [they] are told" by district and ESU administrators. In many cases, the tests they use come from the district or from a textbook. They may supplement those tests with assessments of their own design, but for the most part they are not actively involved in assessment design. This finding is supported by our mathematics survey, which found that teachers in large districts are less likely to have participated in various aspects of the SAA process than those from smaller districts (see Appendix G). In more than one large district, teachers reported that district objectives and CRTs "dictate the curriculum." Moreover, it is not uncommon for teachers to report that "there are a variety of places where these objectives are not aligned to the curriculum and vice versa." These teachers are also more likely to feel that "coverage" is prized over deep learning. They consistently reported moving faster through the curriculum than they would if their professional judgment were driving decision-making.

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[9] See The Center for Rural Affairs Committee on Education, "A School at the Center: Community-Based Education and Rural Redevelopment," Lincoln, NE, 2000.

[10] See, for instance, the Coalition for Community Schools, *Making the Difference: Research and Practice in Community Schools*, Washington DC, 2003 and Carol Lee Doeden, "Community-based Education and Rural Development: Rural Funders Working Group Case Study No.2," Washington, D.C.: Neighborhood Funders Group, 2001.

Hallmarks of Effective Standards, Assessment, and Accountability Processes

What do effective SAA processes in Nebraska schools look like? What are the hallmarks of such processes in schools where educators and students are learning and where productive change is happening? As we survey two years of data, we identify the following hallmarks, which are drawn not from professional literature, but rather from our observations of Nebraska schools working under STARS.

1) *They are built for sustainability*. We introduced the concept of sustainability in the introduction. Sustainability is an ecological term that emphasizes the importance of nurturing a healthy environment with one eye on the present and the other on the future. But "[s]ustainability does not simply mean whether something can last. It addresses how particular initiatives can be developed without compromising the development of others in the surrounding environment, now and in the future."[11] Applied to SAA processes, this means several things: committing to building an ongoing process, not a temporary stopgap until "this assessment thing" blows over; protecting and enhancing healthy programs and projects rather than sacrificing them for short-term convenience; jettisoning unhealthy programs and projects rather than allowing harmful sedimentation to occur; maximizing available resources and creatively seeking needed resources; planning for program and personnel continuity or succession; and promoting programmatic and personnel diversity. Sustainability is perhaps the most important hallmark of effective SAA processes; without it, school change will be ephemeral. It also serves as a guiding concept. That is, each of the following hallmarks contributes to a sustainable process.

2) *They are holistic, integrating assessment, instruction, and curriculum under the umbrella of school improvement.* In effective SAA processes, assessment and instruction are integrated; rather than viewing assessment as something that happens only *after* instruction, educators treat it as a formative part of the instructional process. They embed assessment within the instructional program, rather than relying on event-based, end-of-unit, pencil-and-paper exams. Moreover, assessment and instruction are carefully articulated within the overarching curriculum. All teachers understand how their work fits into the overall program for student learning. Finally, all of this integrated activity is driven by a shared commitment to school improvement. The SAA process is seen as *part of* an overarching and systematic set of school improvement activities.

3) *They are facilitated by strong, focused, shared leadership*. "Leaders" here include teachers, assessment coordinators, and administrators. The most important feature of leadership under STARS is that it is shared: vision-making and responsibility-taking must be a collaborative enterprise. Further, leaders must focus on their goals and pursue them with vigor. Nothing slows or mars an effective school improvement process like an ineffectual, indifferent, or obstructionist leader. But when teacher-leaders and administrator-leaders work together as mutually responsible partners to facilitate the SAA process, an effective and sustainable process is within reach.

4) *They embed professional development and capacity-building into the everyday practices of the school*. This is another way in which effective school improvement processes are holistic: professional development and capacity-building are systematic and focused on school improvement. They are not event-based add-ons: a conference here, a workshop

[11] Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink, "Sustaining Leadership," *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 84, 2003, p. 694.

there. Rather, external and internal professional development activities are integrated such that ongoing learning and capacity building are a routinized and natural part of the life of the school. However trite, the phrase "Every day is a professional development day" should be a school mantra.

5) *They promote and sustain cross-grade and cross-curricular systems thinking*. A third way in which effective SAA processes are integrative involves breaking down traditional barriers between grade levels and content areas. Effective school improvement processes involve the whole school, not just those responsible for reporting. They resist the traditional school culture of isolation and individualism, bringing teachers out of their classrooms to articulate their work with colleagues in other grades and other disciplines.

6) *They place **local** values and needs first in the hierarchy of responsibilities*. A key component of sustainability is a focus on the health of the local ecosystem – the people and programs that comprise the local scene. An effective SAA process will meet external mandates, but only after and as part of meeting local responsibilities. As our study shows, when schools focus primarily on outsiders' perceptions and demands, teachers and administrators become resentful and frustrated – sometimes even paralyzed. Conversely, when a school or district builds from what is already working in their place, we see broader teacher buy-in and more productive processes overall.

7) *They promote and sustain significant teacher ownership*. This hallmark is particularly important in a system that aspires to be "school-based" and "teacher-led." In one sense, "ownership" is an unfortunate metaphor; it implies that one holds exclusive control over a piece of property. However, we mean it to suggest that teachers, together, feel that the process is important to them and they *want* to invest their time and energies in its keeping. A better analogy might be that teachers view the SAA process – and by extension the school – as a trust. They believe in the process, and they are validated by it. It is not something that is being done *to* them, but is rather something they are doing – with enthusiasm and pride. Moreover, a significant portion of the teachers in a building are committed to the process; they do not rely on the heroic few.

8) *They promote and sustain significant community engagement*. As we noted in last year's report, Commissioner of Education Doug Christensen has suggested that informed community conversations are at the heart of a democracy, and are thus a key goal for STARS. This notion has a long history in U.S. education, from Horace Mann's initial conception of mass public education through John Dewey's ideas about democracy and education through current community schools reforms. Moreover, it is clear that schools thrive when they enlist the warm support, and even participation, of their community, from parents to school board members to private citizens. When communities and schools are severed from one another, each loses a valuable ally and resource.

9) *They promote and sustain a culture of learning*. This point may sound obvious, considering that schools' mission revolves around learning. But all too few schools function as cultures of learning, where *all* participants – including educators – learn and where all participants are committed to each other's learning. If a school is organized to dispense information to young people, it is not a culture of learning. On the other hand, if a school is an environment that creates and cultivates continuous learning opportunities for all its members, it is such a culture. The school's focus should, of course, be on *student* learning; in fact, students learn better when adults model meaningful learning, including question-posing, inquiry, and discovery.

10) *They are informed by relevant, accurate data, but are not driven by them.* Effective SAA processes involve the generation, interpretation, and use of relevant and accurate data to inform instructional and curricular decision-making. Carefully generated and interpreted data about student performance, for instance, can help schools identify programmatic strengths and weaknesses and set appropriate goals. However, quantitative data – student achievement statistics, for instance – should not be the *only* guide. In fact, a narrow focus on "achievement" results can blind educators to the contextual features affecting student learning in their school and discourage them from using what is their most powerful assessment tool – their power of observation, and particularly their ability to *listen* to their students. In short, reliable, valid data are important to good decision-making, but they should not be understood as representing the complete story.

Chapter 2
Curriculum and Instruction Under STARS

In Chapter 1, we examined standards, assessment, and accountability (SAA) processes in general. The ultimate goal of any SAA process – state or local – is to improve teaching and learning. In this chapter, we focus the lens on what Beverly Falk (2000) calls "the heart of the matter": teaching and learning.[12] Specifically, we explore the impact of SAA on curriculum and instruction. We begin by identifying trends in curriculum and instruction across the state. Next, we identify a number of continuing challenges educators face as they endeavor to improve teaching and learning. Finally, we offer a brief comment that places our findings in perspective.

An Emerging Portrait

A. Curriculum

7) *In most schools, the curriculum has been focused, but not drastically changed.* Again and again, participants told us that they are identifying gaps and redundancies in their curriculum, streamlining and "fine-tuning" their programs. One principal, for instance, reported increased "focus in our scope and sequence." Participants did not generally report radical overhauls of their offerings, but rather continuous "tinkering." Here, for instance, is a common curriculum process description: "when we sat down for the first time…we saw where the gaps were. We saw, ok, we've covered this…but, you know, we really probably have not taught this in this area. And so then we've gone back and said, 'How can we add that in? What are the things that we can do?'" A teacher in another school offered a specific example: **"**We found out that everybody was touching on [the water cycle] but nobody was hardcore teaching on it and assessing on it...we thought somebody else was doing it. Now we know where it is being taught and assessed." In other instances, teachers told us the only thing that has changed was "documenting what we were already doing." In most schools we visited, though, the curriculum is under constant adjustment, and the result is a more focused and less redundant curriculum.

8) *In more schools, the curriculum is becoming articulated k-12.* This is a new trend in many schools. Participants reported working with their colleagues in other grades for the first time to design an aligned curriculum. An assessment coordinator, for instance, explained that her district's "matrix" will align curriculum and standards such that teachers in each grade will be able to see what teachers in other grades are doing. For instance, she explained, fourth-grade teachers can see that dinosaurs are taught in third-grade, and they need not "reinvent the wheel" with kids. Similarly, a superintendent in another district explained that he brought his entire faculty together to examine curriculum vis-à-vis standards and assessment:

[12] Beverly Falk, *The Heart of the Matter*. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000).

> We took the standards and we made this huge wall chart and people went through and…[marked] what they did. So if you taught anything about it you put an "x" there. Well, then we got back thinking, OK, everybody teaches everything. Well, then we went back and said…put an "I" if you introduce it, "T" if you teach it, "A" if you assess it and "R" if you review it. And then we went back through and made sure that somewhere somebody was teaching and assessing every standard.

This kind of k-12 curriculum development is growing in schools across Nebraska. The upshot, as one principal told us, is that "it's not just…our target years: fourth, eighth, and eleventh; it's not just them. [Responsibility] goes from day one."

9) *In more schools, the curriculum is becoming more integrative.* Participants reported some movement toward curricular integration, especially in writing, which is becoming truly a cross-curricular responsibility. In fact, one math teacher we interviewed talked more about teaching writing than about teaching math. Another noted that "if I'm supposed to be doing a language arts assessment and haven't got it turned in yet, the language arts teacher is going to come and say, 'Hey you need to get that assessing done.'" Similarly, a principal elsewhere described both writing- and math-across-the-curriculum initiatives at her school. She used the example of vocabulary, and specifically a "word of the week" program, in which all teachers are asked to incorporate attention to that word in their lessons. She also told us about math teachers offering strategies to their colleagues on how to teach math in other disciplines. Music teachers, for instance, ask their students to convert quarter-, half-, three-quarter, and whole notes from fractions to decimals. This kind of cross-curricular teaching and even assessing is becoming more familiar in Nebraska schools.

10) *In more schools, literacy is becoming an area of intensified focus.* This trend is hardly a surprise, given state and national attention to reading and writing. Still, it is important to note the increased attention to literacy in Nebraska curricula. Writing, in particular, is receiving special attention throughout the curriculum; "six traits" is becoming a lingua franca among all teachers, not just those whose primary responsibility is the teaching of writing. But literacy in general is receiving more attention as well, especially in schools with increasing numbers of English Language Learners. One principal who works in such an environment explained his approach:

> I put a literacy period in…In addition to everything else they're doing, we're going to have one period of just literacy—right after lunch—66 minutes. Teachers said, 'What are we going to do?' And I said, 'I don't know. But, what I know is if we don't have time to do it, we won't do it'…So really…our teachers kind of brainstormed together, created their own sort of thing and said OK, here's what I want to do…Since then, many of the teachers have taken it on as sort of another expedition: sort of a hands-on project within their content area where they're just really focusing on…literacy, but using their own expertise from their own area.

As this example shows, literacy is being approached both as a subject unto itself and as an integrative curricular component.

5) *In some schools, teachers are "teaching to a test" that does not match their curriculum.* In a few of our interviews, but especially in the surveys we conducted, it becomes clear that many teachers – especially math teachers – are unhappy with criterion-referenced

tests that originate in their districts or ESUs. They feel either that their local curriculum is being narrowed or "dumbed-down" by inadequate tests or that there is a disconnect between the tests and their local curriculum. One math teacher said that in addition to not matching his school's curriculum, the ESU-designed CRT he administers is "horribly written, full of errors, [and has] directions [that] are atrocious at best." This may be an extreme comment, but many teachers expressed their displeasure with the CRTs they are currently using, even when they were involved in creating them. (See also Appendix G for math survey results.)

6) *In some schools, unique and innovative curricula are being sacrificed for expediency.* Teachers in a small school told us about integrative, active, often community-based projects that they have cut in favor of more easily assessed projects. One such teacher was disconsolate at the loss of entrepreneurship courses, which are crucial to the effort to encourage young people to return to their communities and contribute to the local economy. But this is not an issue only for small schools. An educator in a large school, for instance, said

> I really came out at…a magical time, I think, when I look back at it, because my first year was the last year I consider of "feel-good education." You know, we can do a project about the rain forest that takes two and a half weeks, and we're going to paint our trees and we're going to learn about the rain forest really well. We're going to do it in a time-consuming manner, but it's going to be fun. A lot of that stuff has had to go by the wayside because at the end of the year now, the accumulation of how you made your choices, and how you spent your time, and how you educate your children overall, you know, it's going to be reported…you may have to answer to how you made those choices over the year. And teachers understand that those projects have to go – you know, the field trips, two recesses a day, and a half hour of personal reading time, opposed to direct instruction and small groups during that same amount of time for reading. Those pieces have to change, and I think overall it's made us better professionals.

Despite this teacher's positive appraisal of this change, it is not hard to see why many of his colleagues expressed dismay at the loss of innovations like the rain forest project. In fact, one colleague in his building suggested that "the creativity is gone. I think that our teaching has become very dry and that's why I think it's wearing on me." Another said, "we could extend the learning by doing more exploratory learning or more constructivist learning but…that takes time. So we find what's the best way to get this amount covered."

B. Instruction

1) *In many schools, teachers are individualizing instruction, but not drastically changing it.* When we asked participants about instruction and SAA, many spoke of individualization. Teachers indicated that assessment allows them to have a much clearer idea of where each student is as a learner. This allows them to tailor instruction to the individual child, meeting his/her needs. A math teacher, for instance, explained that under the new SAA process in his school, "if the kid is not doing well in fractions, then it makes you…reteach to make sure that kid is at least getting the opportunity. You're not just giving him one shot and if he doesn't get it that time then too bad for him. Now it's like you're giving the kids multiple opportunities." Similarly, a teacher in another school noted that "instead of focusing on just what your objectives are, [SAA] focuses on what

your objectives are for each student. In essence, then, I think that each student almost has an individual education plan." At the same time, most teachers reported that their instruction has not been radically overhauled; most reported greater emphasis on documenting learning, but not shifts in emphasis regarding content. This is supported by findings on both our math and writing surveys to the effect that assessments have prompted few shifts in instructional emphasis. (See Appendices F and G.)

2) *In more schools, instruction and assessment are being integrated*. As we note in Chapter 1, we see a trend toward treating assessment as *part of* instruction, rather than an event-based add-on. In one school we visited, for instance, educators spoke of instruction as having three components: designing, delivering, and assessing. They described the instructional process as a "continuous loop," with assessment guiding designing. These teachers insisted that assessment "is not an end product [but rather] a piece of the process" that tells teachers and students "what they ought to know next." In these schools, the teachers told us, assessments "come as no surprise" to students because they are folded into what is going on instructionally in the classroom.

3) *In more schools, teachers are expecting more from their students*. Generally, teachers meant one of two things here. First, some believe the mathematics and language arts assessments promote higher-level thinking – moving from memorization to application, for instance. One math teacher explained this line of thinking: "I ask [students] more in-depth questions, instead of just straightforward questions for them to answer." A language arts teacher, meanwhile, said that with her district's new assessments, "I think the classroom practices have become more interactive. You have more of the students actively involved." However, a second, more negative line of thinking also emerged here. Some teachers told us that they teach *more*, but not *better*. That is, they cover too much ground, sacrificing deep learning for "coverage" and overwhelming children in the process. For example, a math teacher told us that "there's only one CRT on story problems, so I find myself, instead of spending more time doing that like I should, I'm just trying to get them through the CRT." Similarly, a language arts teacher described a shift in her teaching as a result of SAA in her district: "[Before, t]hey had high scores; they learned; I had the time. Now it's just like, OK, we talked about nouns a little bit. We have to take a CRT, now…."

4) *In more schools, students are being involved in the assessment process*. Language arts and mathematics teachers alike spoke of sharing rubrics with students. This helps students "clearly understand what it is that they are going to be asked to do," as one teacher said, but it also helps them self-assess. For many teachers, involving students in assessment is a way to involve them more actively in their learning: "If you're looking at a one-time only test, the kids don't learn much from that assessment. When you're doing the ongoing assessments, where the kids look at the feedback, they turn around before the next time and they think, okay, what can we work on to improve it for the next time?" In some cases, teachers felt self-assessment motivates students to learn and to achieve at higher levels. Moreover, they thought standards and assessment offer students and teachers a shared language through which to explore and articulate learning: "you can walk into a classroom and a teacher is going to be able to tell you what the standard is – and sometimes even the kids because the kids are being told and taught what standards they are working on and why they are important." The consistent exception to this trend is the school that administers large CRTs from the district or ESU. Here, in fact, we heard many complaints that assessments do *not* encourage students' involvement in their own learning: "It seems more and more we're hearing, you know, that the teaching style

needs to be more interactive and less teacher-led…needs to be more hands on. And yet, we're still assessing with paper and pencil, fill in the blank, CRT-style."

5) *In more schools, instruction is intensely task-oriented.* As the "rain forest" example above suggests, many classrooms are much more tightly controlled environments than they once were, with an intensified focus on instruction keyed directly to academic objectives. "Time on task," many teachers told us, trumps things like field trips, guest speakers, and other "fun" activities. Especially in large districts or consortia, teachers feel their work is "prescripted." A few educators praised this development as a sign of increased professionalism; more, however, bemoan it as a sign of a slide toward "joyless" education. The latter speak of "robbing" students of the joy of learning and of broad educational opportunities outside of core academic subjects.

6) *Teachers believe SAA, and particularly standards, give them focus and direction*. Almost no teachers we spoke with were averse to the standards, in theory or in substance. (The only substantive complaints involved perceived broadness in the standards.) On the contrary, many found them to be useful guides for instruction. One educator suggested the major benefit of SAA is that it provides "a roadmap that allows direction and purpose." Many others lauded the SAA process for keeping them focused and "on task." One teacher said, "It just really keeps you focused because there's so many things you need to cover and so many skills students need. It just really makes sure that as a teacher I keep those things in mind and I know exactly there's a plan: here is what we are doing, here is what we are doing next, and here is how it fits together."

7) *Teachers continue to express support for six-trait writing, but they voice a range of concerns about the statewide writing test*. This finding echoes last year's report. Our surveys and interviews alike reveal that teachers find the six-trait writing program useful for instruction. However, they also articulated concerns, including the type of writing called for by the SWA (descriptive), the inauthentic conditions under which students are asked to write, and the scoring of the exam (see Appendix F, especially the analysis of narrative comments). More than one teacher we talked to, for instance, indicated that "a description" is not the same thing as an essay, and if the state wanted the former, "it should have been one paragraph." They also echoed survey respondents in worrying that even good writers "don't write like that" – that is, on a canned prompt, without interaction with others, under timed writing conditions. One teacher described an honors student who is "awesome; his writing blows me away every time I read it." But on the day of the exam, this student was in tears, saying, "'I can't do it…I can't write like this.'" Teachers who voiced concerns like this often pointed to writing portfolios as an alternative to the impromptu, timed assessment. (See our year one report, Chapter 3).

8) *Teachers are split on whether their SAA process will improve student achievement (scores), but many cite learning gains.* While some teachers were simply at a loss when we asked them how SAA affects student achievement/learning, others anticipated achievement gains as a result of more focused, individualized instruction:

> [I]f we're good assessors, if we really know where students are and what they're knowledge and skills are, then we can also identify the gaps that they have and, if they are not meeting the assessment criteria, provide additional instruction, reassess, and hopefully, we won't have too many students falling through the cracks. And that, to me, is the real goal of assessment, the real goal of the whole STARS process.

However, only a few participants pointed to actual achievement gains. (A middle school principal, for instance, described higher standardized tests scores, student contest winners, and more students taking the ACT.) On the other hand, many teachers see evidence of improvement in student *learning* in their classrooms: "I just think from a personal classroom experience, I see more students being able to talk more and be on the same page with the teachers about what's expected in a piece of writing, for example." One teacher described how an improvement in her assessment program led to an improvement in student learning: "I used to do chapter tests or unit tests and now it seems especially at the third-grade level if I assess more frequently and then do more reviewing and then throw in a couple questions over each skill, it seems that they retain it a lot more than they did before."

10) *Teachers continue to feel that too much instructional time is being sacrificed to assessment*. This is a common perception in both the interviews and narrative comments on the surveys. Participants described end-of-unit, paper-and-pencil tests that last days, sometimes weeks. One teacher was admirably self-reflective on this score: "the assessment process takes away learning time…a lot of that's not necessarily the assessments' fault—it's mine because, like I said, I still do my tests…extra. If I could implement them more into the program where that was just part of it, it probably wouldn't affect it so much." But beyond the assessment/teaching split, we were told, lies the problem of documentation, as we discussed in Chapter 1. Educators described this task as an "enormous," "overwhelming," and "ridiculous" responsibility that eats into planning and personal time. In short, many teachers feel that recordkeeping is replacing instruction as the defining feature of the job.

Continuing Challenges: Curriculum and Instruction

6) *Time.* While many Nebraska teachers are innovators of curriculum and instruction, they struggle to find time for this important development work. As one language arts teacher told us, "I just need some time to think, to figure that stuff out, and I haven't had it." But teachers and administrators also complain about the amount of classroom time testing takes up, and the amount of teachers' planning time SAA in general (but especially documenting and reporting) takes up. This is a very typical comment from a teacher: "we waste too much time on testing and not enough time just staying in the classroom."

7) *Too much testing*. The SAA processes many schools are developing involve primarily pencil-and-paper tests (to the chagrin of several teachers we interviewed). In other words, many schools are responding to STARS by *testing more*. Indeed, we detect little attention to performance and other types of non-testing assessment. This compounds the other challenges listed here – especially lack of time and the dichotomy between assessment and instruction. As we indicate above, teachers reported giving over weeks of classroom time to administering tests – including huge CRTs designed by districts and ESUs. Many complained that this is hurting their teaching: "I am spending more time on documenting than on lesson planning or grading. And that's why I feel personally that I'm not as good a teacher as I used to be, because my time is not being spent on what would be most valuable to my students." Another teacher put this issue in perspective by explaining that she teaches several courses, and *each one* includes at least 10 CRTs. The sheer paperwork involved in this process, she stressed, is enormous.

8) *Testing drives curriculum and instruction*. The opportunity and challenge posed by STARS is that curriculum and instruction can drive assessment, not the other way

around. However, we see numerous examples in our interviews and especially our surveys of test-driven curriculum and instruction. Schools and districts continue to "design down" from the standards or a CRT, rather than beginning with what works in their classrooms and schools and designing assessments that connect back to standards. The result, as we see clearly in the narrative comments on the mathematics survey, is often a narrowed curriculum and disaffected teachers. (See Appendix G.) Teachers in large schools are particularly likely to describe their teaching and curriculum as "dictated" by tests designed outside their building. But increasingly, small schools that have consorted confront similar scenarios, sometimes with dire consequences, as when community-based education is shoved aside in favor of consortium interests.

9) *Student motivation.* We see some evidence in our interviews that teachers are working to make assessment a meaningful learning opportunity for students, even involving students in the assessment process. In fact, in schools that have instituted student portfolio assessment systems, teachers consistently report that students take pride in their work.[13] Moreover, our mathematics and writing surveys suggest that most teachers believe their students are doing their best work on assessments and are motivated to do well. However, on balance, students seem to be responding more negatively than positively to assessment, and especially large tests. One teacher, for instance, says, "a lot of [students] just fill in the blanks and I don't see how it is a meaningful learning experience." An eighth-grade teacher suggests that her students' attitude about tests "is very negative… they are really tested out." A number of teachers, especially in math, also reported that their students are "tested to death," and are apprehensive about tests. Our surveys also reveal that teachers perceive their students to experience anxiety about assessments (see Appendices F and G).

10) *Teacher motivation.* As we will see in Chapter 3, leaders reported that one of their major challenges is keeping teachers engaged and enthusiastic. Many teachers spoke of being "weary," or "burnt out," enervated by the demands of their professional life. This is especially true, we observe, in districts where teachers do not feel they have control over their own work – in districts in which the SAA process is top-down, for instance, where teachers are just "doing what we are told." More than one such teacher expressed a keen eagerness for retirement.

Curriculum and Instruction in Perspective

Commissioner Christensen has said that important decisions about student learning should take place in the classroom, not in the boardroom or the offices of bureaucrats and politicians. To a great extent, that is precisely where they are being made in Nebraska. Moreover, they are informed by significant energy and creativity on the part of the state's mostly talented educators. It seems indisputable that STARS is promoting, without scripting, improvements in curriculum and instruction in Nebraska schools.

At the same time, there are causes for concern in this area. We see, first of all, a lack of trust among teachers of mathematics and writing in the tests they are administering to their students. Further, those tests are generally pencil-and-paper, end-of-unit tests, and are not embedded in, or in many cases aligned with, local curricula or instruction. As a result many teachers do *not* feel

[13] In a school serving Native American students, for instance, the principal explained that portfolios promote student engagement because they involve "craftsmanship," a deeply-held value in the local culture.

that important educational decisions are in their hands; instead, they see politicians and upper administrators as calling the shots. In the case of writing, a growing number of teachers feel that the SWA is undermining their process approach to writing. In math, a significant number of teachers worry about the narrowing or "dumbing down" of their curriculum. These trends seriously erode the potential of STARS to place the locus of change in the classroom.

Specifically, we wish to highlight the potential danger of the loss of place-based curriculum and instruction in our state, especially (though not exclusively) in small or rural communities. In a climate in which time is the scarcest resource, expertise is at a premium, and financial resources are increasingly strained, it is understandable that small schools would opt for standardized, often ESU-designed CRTs. But when locally meaningful curriculum and instruction are sacrificed, communities suffer along with schools, as we point out in Chapter 1. We urge NDE to pay particular heed to recommendations in Chapter 5 regarding the protection and enhancement of existing local practices. In small and rural communities, sustainability is neither a fancy academic concept nor a strictly school-based challenge; it is an abiding ethic and a daily struggle.

Chapter 3
School Leadership Under STARS

Our study shows that school leadership is changing in Nebraska, largely (but not exclusively) as a result of STARS. In this chapter, we attempt to capture this shift, organizing our findings around framing questions. We then identify some of the challenges faced by leaders as they negotiate this shift. Finally, we identify some hallmarks of effective school leaders under STARS, based on our observations of leadership in action as well as testimony from leaders and their colleagues.

We note at the outset that "leadership" may be practiced by anyone in a school – including teachers, administrators, and even students. While this chapter focuses primarily on building administrators (principals), it is informed by the perceptions and experiences of leadership by superintendents, principals, and teachers alike. Most of our findings and observations apply to all three groups of leaders.

An Emerging Portrait

- *What are the general trends in school leadership in Nebraska?*

1) *Teachers are becoming leaders in the SAA process*. Almost all participants reported that teachers are taking leadership roles in the SAA process in their district and school. The trend is toward what one principal described as "ground up kind of a grassroots leadership where the teachers are really taking more leadership as far as the school improvement goes." Teachers are designing assessments, setting SAA goals, developing curriculum and instruction, and generally driving the school improvement process. One assessment coordinator, for instance, said that in the SAA process in her school, "there are teacher leaders all the way up." A teacher in another district explained that teachers "have had total input into how our tests are operated, which tests we use, how they're written, how they're assessed." In fact, in this district, like many others, teams of teachers write the assessments. The exception seems to be some large districts or consortiums that use major CRTs; here, it is not uncommon to hear teachers describe their participation in these terms: "Basically we were given a test to look at it, and administer it, and pilot it." On balance, though, teachers are becoming more active, as leaders, in their SAA process. Consider what happened in one school, told from two points of view:

> *Teacher*: [T]he other day we felt really bad because we called a meeting and we put it at the bottom of the bulletin board, but nobody had…told [our superintendent]. So we had the meeting after school and it happened to be in my room; the teachers from the high school came down. [The superintendent] came in right as we were finishing. He said, 'Nobody invited me.'
>
> *Superintendent*: [T]wo weeks ago they had a curriculum and assessment meeting and I wasn't even invited and it was great. I mean, it was awesome in that they have

now assumed so much of the control and responsibility for this that they feel comfortable with out having me.

2) *Leaders are making the SAA process locally meaningful, not just fulfilling a mandate from the state.* One third-grade teacher offered the following principle: "You have to be able to do this for your students." She went on to explain, "we are not really doing it to report to the state anymore; we are doing it for the kids." In another school, teachers and administrators described how their student portfolio system has helped them focus on what is meaningful in their community. At the end of the year, according to the high school principal, the school hosts a reception for the community, and students present their portfolios. The model for this presentation is an architectural review, and community members are encouraged to ask questions: "'Well what about…? Have you considered this…? What's your plan?'" While student portfolios and presentations are used to measure student performance on state standards, their *primary* aim is to promote student learning in the context of community engagement. Elsewhere, a district administrator told us that "we are not just going through the motions because the state tells us this is what we are doing. We want to have a purpose for it and make them know that we are doing what we are supposed to do and also that it is beneficial to the students …and to the teachers." Making the SAA process locally meaningful is an emerging leadership priority in Nebraska.

3) *Leaders are struggling to keep morale high in a time of many challenges*. This is not an easy time for school leaders – budget cuts, a new school aid formula, new reporting requirements, new federal mandates, and much more conspire to erode morale and detract educators from their primary responsibilities. One superintendent, for instance, told us that his greatest challenge is to prevent teacher burnout, "trying to stay positive about the whole issue and to keep student achievement...at the forefront of what we're doing." Another offered almost the exact same description of his greatest challenge as a leader: "[t]rying to keep the teachers focused on the students and not letting them get burdened with the extra work and time involved." Many leaders talked about needing to be a "cheerleader" to keep the staff's spirits high and to keep everyone focused on teaching and learning. While we see growing investment in SAA and school improvement in some schools, we also heard dire descriptions such as the following: "Morale in this school is one of disunity. The teachers are constantly at each other and there seems to be little comradery…There is little hope of ever developing a community of teachers and not just a group that happens to be working in the same place." (Sometimes we heard a single school described in both ways.) In context such as this, leaders feel as though they are in what one principal called a "sinking boat," in which everyone is bailing water simply to survive.

4) *Administrators are learning new roles and developing new capacities*. As teachers come to share more of the leadership of schools, both principals and superintendents are learning to be different kinds of leaders. As one principal told us, "If you are a leader that likes to control everything, it's pretty hard to do…because the teachers are so involved; sometimes they are telling us what's going on. So I think you have to be able to share some of that power." Likewise, a principal in another school said, "[T]eachers are the ones that are in the classroom dealing with the assessments. It is not just something that I can dictate and expect them to do." While traditional, top-down leadership stressed "managing" people, this new brand of cooperative leadership requires new roles and capacities. The next section details the roles that building and district administrators tell us they are now playing under STARS.

- *What roles do school leaders play in the SAA process, and what models of leadership do they enact?*

The following roles and models are extrapolated from 1) school leaders' descriptions of their work, 2) descriptions by others of leaders' work, and 3) our observations of their work. In some cases, the terms are ours; the taxonomy, too, is of our design. Still we believe the following captures distinct if overlapping emphases and tendencies we detected among the leaders in our study.

1) ***Supporter/Coach/Cheerleader****: facilitative leadership*. Some leaders describe themselves in support roles. They are not the primary actors; rather, their job is to spur "those on the field" (to follow the sports analogy) to do their best work. One principal, for instance, said, "you let those people get out there and do their thing and by doing so, by standing back and letting them lead, they've taken over. And it's their curriculum, it's their assessment, and that's where it needs to be; it's not with the principal." It is not uncommon for these leaders to say that they want to "empower" their staff. For instance, a principal offered the following description of his role: "you want your teachers to take control and to take the lead in the improvement process. So my role has been an encourager, as a supporter…to help make sure that they have the things that they need to be successful and to be able to achieve the goals that they are setting for the school and the district." What we call "facilitative leadership" is nicely captured in the words of one superintendent: "Leadership to me is when a task is through, the people say, 'We did it ourselves.'"

2) ***Team member****: shared leadership*. Some leaders describe themselves as participatory partners with their staff in common enterprise. In this leadership model, the leader is at the table with everyone else, as a mutually responsible colleague. This kind of leadership is represented in the comment from a principal that he and his superintendent are "just one member of the team." A teacher in another district said, "it is great to see teachers and administrators sitting around a table and we forget necessarily their title." When teachers take this role, they are not just facilitating, but also actively participating in the work and leadership responsibilities; this is shared leadership.

3) ***Delegator***: *distributive leadership*. Some leaders focus on their role in distributing responsibilities among the staff. A principal in a large school, for instance, says, "you gotta be able to delegate and set up these different committees within your building and put very capable people—very responsible people—who can make a difference in key places." This kind of distributive leadership is cooperative, to be sure, but unlike shared and facilitative leadership, it is more focused on sharing the work than in sharing leadership. (Notice the terminology: distribut*ive*, not distribut*ed*, leadership.) It tends to be somewhat directive and top-down; the delegator is always the one "in charge." This is why delegating is often identified as a traditional management skill.

4) ***Buffer***: *centralized leadership.* A very few leaders in our study discuss their role as protector of the staff. They place themselves between the staff and all external forces and pressures (including state SAA demands). While often well-intentioned ("I want them to be able to do their jobs without interference"), this

form of leadership is traditional and centralized, as it has the effect of mystifying (and sometimes infantilizing) the staff.

5) ***Manager***: *centralized leadership*. Again, we are in the traditional model of leadership, in which the leader's job is to keep everyone "on task" and to keep the workplace free of distraction and conflict. The manager runs a tight, tidy ship, and embodies, in his (or less frequently her) person the mantle of authority. A couple leaders we visited in last year's study either claimed or were observed in this role; this is not true of any of the leaders in this year's study.

Of course, these roles and models are not mutually exclusive; in practice, leaders move more or less freely among them. Still, they represent general emphases and dispositions. The categories are less useful in classifying individuals, at any rate, than in identifying trends. The clear trend among leaders in our study is away from the final two categories and toward one or more of the first three. In general, then, *we see a shift away from an individualistic and centralized model of leadership toward some form of cooperative leadership*.

- *What do school leaders think are the most important leadership qualities, capacities, or principles required to enact a successful SAA process?*

1) *Vision*. Leaders spoke again and again of the importance of having a vision: a mental picture of an improved school *and* how to get there. They regularly invoked the *kind of school* they and their staff are endeavoring to create. The task, one principal told us, it to develop "a building perspective," so that everyone approaches their individual work with the overarching goal of school improvement in mind. Another principal extended this idea, suggesting that this building perspective "needs to be framed around, say, assessment, and then you accommodate individual needs within that framework. Not, 'Oh, I'm interested in this, I'm interested in that.' There's a lot to be interested in. But a building moving together can be really powerful. You can hit the target harder." A happy by-product of this approach, from a teacher's point of view, is a reduction of pressure on individuals: "It has not come down like, 'You know, [name], you need to do that'; it has come down that as a school we need to do that. So I think that has made it easier. It isn't really a personal criticism…it is more of a school goal." Also, teachers and administrators alike stressed the need to be "proactive" – to look ahead to "what is on the horizon" so that schools can be well prepared when change happens.

2) *Commitment to local needs and values.* Above, we cite educators who insist they are engaging in SAA for themselves and their students, not for the state. Preserving commitment to local needs and values sometimes takes courage. A superintendent, for instance, described his decision not to use a state-approved program that checks for assessment reliability: "if it means that this school district gets a 'not met' or takes a hit on that particular area because we don't use the KR21, we are willing to do that. Our board says…that is fine; we are not doing that for the state, we are doing this for ourselves." Leaders like this cited commitment to their school and community first as a key leadership principle.

3) *Patience/perseverance*. Leaders talked about taking the long view with an understanding that change happens in small steps. In a culture where change is constant but constantly slow, school leaders are in a perpetually difficult position. They must commit, as several of our participants noted, to "an ongoing process," aiming for consistency and continuity. They must "believe in the process," as one administrator put it, and play it out despite

whatever difficulties might arise. Along the way, leaders reported, "you have to be very patient with [the staff] and let them work through the process and not just dictate what they are going to do because we want that ownership to come from them."

4) *Team-building skills*. Almost all of the leaders in our study discussed the significance of facilitating teamwork among grade-level and content-area groups. Many of them also spoke of the whole building as a "team," and the need to "move together as a building," as one principal put it. A successful leader will facilitate the formation, work, and maintenance of the teams. This generally involves modeling collaboration, listening carefully and being a "sounding board" for teachers, having a clearly defined and well executed group process, and providing encouragement and resources for the work.

5) *Trust*. Leaders spoke of trust in several ways. First, they talked about trusting their staff: having confidence in their professionalism. They also talked about having the trust *of* their staff – inspiring confidence in their ability to lead. For instance, a principal described a key ingredient to a successful SAA process: "trusting the principal and the direction that he is leading them and trusting they'll have the materials that they need." Elsewhere, an assessment coordinator said that in his building, if teachers

> find a piece that isn't still working for them, it's not something they need to hide or be scared to share; it's something they can actually walk into this office and say, 'All right, we're still not reaching where we need to in reading or writing…we're using what we have to the fullest of our abilities. Do you have instructional strategies that we can use? Do you know of training we can go to?'

Finally, as we note under #3 above, leaders spoke of the need to trust the SAA process (or any process to which they have committed). Seeing the process through, trusting that it *will* pay dividends, is a crucial ingredient of leadership.

6) *A Consistent Role*. Leaders told us that in a time of constant change, one of their most important responsibilities is to provide stability. This usually means assuming a consistent role, *and* assigning consistent roles to others. During an interview, an assessment coordinator answered our question about the principal's role. Addressing the principal, he said,

> I'd say you're a provider. You know, from the beginning, you provided the vision….You also modeled its importance; you didn't just *say* it was important. You could tell that you believed in what you were saying; you modeled that. Your words were consistent and professional throughout the year. You also provided the resources when it came time to improve those test scores because we did not start out as, you know, one of the top schools in the district; we started out as one of the lower ones...You…didn't simply say, 'We're going to do this; and next year, you're going to do better; their scores will improve.' You know, it was, 'Let's sit down and figure out *why* they're not better or why they're not as strong as we think they should be. And what resources are out there that we can purchase?'

This same principal in turn expects consistency from his staff, as he explained:

> my expectation of teachers is that they can behave in the same way that a cardiovascular surgeon could behave, and that they have the kind of skills to not leave somebody who's had a reading heart attack lie on the table three years before somebody figures out that we need to shock them. You know, we need to intervene

> immediately; there needs to be steps to correct kids that aren't learning or having difficulty learning. And when you behave that way, and when you talk that way, there's a different level of professionalism.

He is also clear on what does *not* fall under teachers' roles: "I think a lot of people want teachers to be married to data; I want to marry them to kids' instruction. We need somebody else to help provide that piece for them."

We are struck by the absence in this list of traditional management skills: decisiveness, authoritativeness, efficient resource allocation, personnel management, organization, and so on. While each may also play a role in effective leadership under STARS, these are not the *key* ingredients. This is consistent with our finding that school leaders in Nebraska, like many business leaders, are moving away from traditional, top-down leadership and toward cooperative, team-based models. One principal made this explicit connection, noting that he and colleagues are "shifting" from the manager role to the "instructional leader" role.

Continuing Challenges

1) *Time*. Not surprisingly, time tops leaders' lists of challenges they face. They are in general agreement (as are all of our study participants) that time is the most valuable, and scarcest, resource in school life. They talked about finding enough time for professional development, for developing assessments, and for assembling district assessment portfolios. Some leaders are making headway on this stubborn issue by incorporating paid professional development days into the school year, or adding them to the beginning or the end of the school year. For instance, a superintendent explained his approach:

> We provided that huge amount of time this year. Teachers have eight additional days, workshop days, interspersed throughout the year and at least half of those days are structured for staff development or training related to assessment….We've kind of set it [aside] for the assessment; we changed the structure of time based on the feedback we got from people. And now I think it helped us because now we have an expectation. Don't whine to me about not having time. It's taken away an excuse, I think, and it's provided an expectation.

Even so, time remains the most heavily cited challenge for teacher-leaders and administrator-leaders alike.

2) Recordkeeping/paperwork. Many leaders described the long, arduous hours involved in recordkeeping for the SAA process. They described it as "burdensome" and "overwhelming." This is especially true among administrators who have taken reporting responsibilities upon themselves so that teachers are free to focus on instruction. But the increasing recordkeeping is taking a toll on everyone: "paperwork is becoming so enormous that [no] school district can handle it." One principal said that "[t]here's just so much data pouring in and piling in…and then to come back and realize that even though we have a mountain of data, what's it really mean?" We heard leaders expressing more frustration about this aspect of STARS than any other.

3) Keeping staff motivated. As we discuss above, several leaders noted the difficulty of keeping morale and commitment high among teachers, who often feel overwhelmed and frustrated by intensifying demands. These leaders talked about needing to be a "cheerleader," a constant source of moral support. They realize that this is part of the

job, but they also understand that it constrains their ability to push forward on other fronts. Not surprisingly, this issue is most pronounced in schools in which teachers feel resentment or serious frustration about STARS and their local SAA. It is also compounded by fears that Nebraska will (be made to) move to a single state test – a prospect one educator described as "the cloud of doom that we operate under."

4) *Constant change*. Leaders struggle with the shifting demands of STARS, especially lately, as the state continues to negotiate new federal requirements. As one superintendent put it, "[t]hings are always added…and very seldom is anything taken out." Teachers and administrators alike feel the pressure of intensification. Administrators tend, too, to be particularly apprehensive about what the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) formula will mean for their schools (even, we should note, in high-performing schools, where the fear is that there will not be *enough* room for continuous improvement). Some also feel that changes are not always communicated to them in a timely fashion – though we heard much less of this complaint this year than we did last year. Finally, some educators feel that the message about SAA is changing in Nebraska. They suggested that Nebraska policymakers initiated STARS with the notion that all kids can succeed, but some of their assessment validity checks penalize assessments on which most students performed well. These teachers have become suspicious of the intentions of the system. Taken together, these trends pose a serious challenge to leaders who are attempting to make steady progress in their schools.

5) *A school culture of parochialism.* "Local" can all too easily turn to "localism," creating an intractably insular school culture. In these contexts, school personnel neither know nor care what happens outside their walls. They have little understanding of what is happening in education nationally, in other states, in other districts, or even in other schools within their district. In fact, they sometimes have little understanding, or desire to know about, what is going on in their own communities. They are confident that they are doing their job, and their mantra is "just leave us alone." Under these conditions, it is extremely difficult to initiate, let alone sustain, meaningful change. Internally, too, we sometimes see a culture of isolation and individualism in the schools. One teacher described the modus operandi of this culture succinctly: "They do what they gotta do, we do what we gotta do, and we haven't seen any [real collaboration]." To be sure, the schools described here are a minority in this state. In many schools, as we note elsewhere, collaboration is growing. But even in these schools, leaders often find it difficult to wrench the school out of the stubborn culture in which "everybody [is] just working in their own little space and don't bother me," as one teacher aptly put it. It does not seem to be a stretch to say that most schools are learning how to be different kinds of organizations – and this identity shift is far from painless and universally welcomed.

Hallmarks of Effective School Leaders

What do effective school leaders look like? What are the hallmarks of leaders in schools where educators and students are learning and where productive change is happening? As we survey two years of data, we identify the following hallmarks, which are drawn not from professional literature, but rather from our observations of Nebraska leaders working under STARS.

1) They understand the hallmarks of effective school improvement processes. Certainly, we do not claim to have a patent on such hallmarks; leaders' own lists may well deviate from

our own (see Chapter 1). Still, we are convinced that effective leaders have a vision of an integrated, holistic, and above all sustainable school improvement process. As we indicated in Chapter 1, thinking sustainably means nurturing a healthy environment with one eye on the present and the other on the future. For instance, we think of the superintendent who is actively planning for his own succession, putting in place a process that will live, and continue to grow, long after his tenure.

2) *They develop specific strategies to enact that school improvement vision*. As the example under #1 suggests, leaders do not simply *declare* their vision; they also enact it through concrete strategies. A leader may have a vision for k-12 integration, for instance, but unless s/he has a process and a set of specific strategies in place whereby educators would convene to do that difficult work, the vision will remain just that. We think, for instance, of the superintendent who used the wall chart and the ITAR (Introduce, Teacher, Assess, Review) method to engage the whole faculty in k-12 curriculum development (see Chapter 2).

3) *They seek to integrate their own vision and those of their colleagues*. Again, "having" a vision is not enough under STARS. "The vision" must be broadly shared by the school staff in order to be enacted. This means not only "selling" one's own vision, but also incorporating the visions of other individuals into a shared, larger vision. This process of negotiated meaning-making requires several key intellectual skills, including listening, interpreting, analyzing, synthesizing, and articulating (in both senses of the word). It also requires valuing and acting on diverse points of view. We think, for instance, of the principal who instituted a literacy period, but then charged teachers to develop the curriculum, each from his/her own expertise (see Chapter 2).

4) *They honor resistance without indulging it.* Effective leaders know that change is often painful, as it requires letting go of what once was, and *who* one once was. They expect, accept, and honor resistance through demonstrating patience and working closely with those who are resistant. They work to understand resistance and to learn from it, understanding that resistance and subversion are often productive catalysts. By the same token, they do not simply indulge resistance and obstructionism; they hold people accountable to the high standards of conduct and contribution to the teaching and learning community. At the same time, they try to remove the causes of resistance. We think, for instance, of the superintendent who introduced more professional development time to address teacher concerns about lack of time to do the work required by SAA (see above).

5) *They are learners*. To be a learner is to be curious, to inquire, to take risks, and to seek out new experiences, perspectives, and knowledge. In order to become effective learners, students must be surrounded by adults who know how to learn. This applies to school leaders. This notion seems to run counter to traditional conceptions of leaders as strong, decisive, and knowledgeable. But we see no conflict here: one can be strong, decisive, and knowledgeable *and* be a learner. What a learner cannot be, quite simply, is infallible or all-knowing. We think, for instance, of the new principal who talked to us about surrounding herself with teachers from whom she had much to learn.

6) *They are accountable.* Because effective leaders are role models for educators and students alike, they take responsibility for their words and actions; indeed, they invite scrutiny. They do not hold themselves "above the fray," but instead make themselves answerable to their various constituents: colleagues, other educators, parents, the

community, and the state. They understand and value the need to be accountable, but they are never servile. We think, for instance, of the principal in an extremely impoverished school/community, who, after learning of his students' poor performance on the SWA, told the community and students that he took responsibility for not preparing students for the test. But then he went one step further, admitting that writing instruction in the school *was* substandard, and promising that he would take concrete steps to see that this would change. (He did, and it has.)

7) *They develop a distinct and consistent role.* Leadership styles and roles vary, but common among effective leaders is the clarity of their role in the school. Colleagues know when and how to approach the leaders with questions, concerns, or requests. They can count on the leader to perform certain functions, take certain responsibilities, and stand for certain principles. Obviously, roles evolve as processes and circumstance and people change; however, effective leaders lend stability even amid constant change. We think, for instance, of the math teacher who decided she could become an expert in teaching math across the curriculum, and now regularly offers workshops and runs meetings for her colleagues in other disciplines on incorporating math into their work.

8) *They use resources sustainably.* Effective leaders are adept at securing resources, to be sure. But more importantly, they use available resources in a sustainable way. In other words, they use them to protect and enhance what is healthy in their environment and to jettison or minimize what is unhealthy. They do not use resources – whether human or monetary – haphazardly, but rather as part of a concerted program to improve the school. We think, for instance, of the small school administrator who made a small investment in training teachers to write grants – and is now reaping the benefits of superior technology and several funded curriculum projects.

Chapter 4
Professional Development Under STARS

Our study demonstrates that professional development continues to be a primary focus for most Nebraska schools. Professional development opportunities are widely available, and teachers and administrators are taking advantage. Moreover, the *kind* of professional development educators are receiving is changing. In this chapter, we identify key trends in professional development. We then examine some continuing challenges to regular, high-quality professional development for Nebraska educators. We end the chapter with a discussion of some hallmarks of effective professional development and collaboration.

An Emerging Portrait

1) *A variety of SAA-related professional development opportunities are available to Nebraska educators*. Our study participants uniformly reported regular access to professional development opportunities. These opportunities include district inservices and meetings; ESU workshops and trainings; state-sponsored workshops and trainings (including Rick Stiggins workshops); regional, state, and national professional conferences; and specific projects such as writing curriculum or working on a team to develop assessments. Standards, assessment, and accountability (SAA), in fact, seem to be prompting more professional development; according to one participant, "people are being forced to reassess what they are doing individually and given the opportunity to change." Another said, "we pay more attention to articles, we pay more attention to conferences on assessment, [and] we seek out additional information hoping to help our school and help our teachers, and ultimately help our students."

2) *Schools and districts are extremely supportive of educators' ongoing professional development*. Participants across the board indicated that their schools and districts will send them to any workshop, conference, etc. that they wish to attend, as long as they provide a good rationale for going. A teacher comment like this one is not uncommon: "They [school administrators] are very supportive of you having chances to grow and they're really big on the teacher-led part." Schools and districts have clearly made ongoing professional development a priority. The few times when teachers were not able to attend activities they wished to attend, the obstacle was money, not willingness of administrators.

3) *Assessment literacy continues to be an area of focus*. As was true last year, participants in this year's study perceive growth in their own and their colleagues' assessment literacy. While the technical aspects of assessment (particularly quality criteria five and six) continue to vex many educators, they consistently reported that they are learning more and more about assessment as their SAA process develops. One principal, for

instance, discussed what he and his staff has learned: "definitely we're becoming much more knowledgeable about what authentic assessment is and what is really reliable data." Another described having a district assessment specialist come to his building to work with teachers: "they spent time looking at data, looking at assessments…they didn't have to develop anything, just exploring assessment and how it's used and maybe places they struggled with assessment. Helping them understand what it might mean…a very broad, sweeping picture…of assessment to get more comfortable with it." Indeed, we find much less anxiety about teachers' assessment expertise this year than we did last year, probably because educators have sought out professional development opportunities related to assessment. At the state level, six-trait writing and the Statewide Writing Assessment continue to blanket the state; almost all language arts and also many mathematics teachers mentioned receiving training in this area. Participants also mentioned Rick Stiggins workshops and sometimes direct assistance from the assessment staff at NDE.

4) *Professional development is becoming more collaborative.* This is true both in the methods of the workshops, etc. and in the way the professional development cycles back into the school. We see the former in the movement away from traditional inservices and toward hands-on, interactive workshops. (We discussed this shift in last year's report.) A principal, for instance, told us that he is seeing more powerful change in his building through small-group, hands-on workshops rather than "a day[long] blow-and-go on something." Also, we see changing methods in the growing number of cross-grade and cross-curricular offerings – six-trait writing for entire staffs, for instance. As for "cycling back," this happens when teachers return from a professional development activity and train their colleagues on what they have learned. In this way, professional development is approached not as an individual opportunity, but as an opportunity for *staff* development. This emphasis seems to be growing in Nebraska schools.

5) *Professional development is starting to become embedded in school life.* Most participants, when asked about professional development, cited only examples of external, off-site workshops, meetings, and the like. However, several cited internal professional development such as grade-level meetings, curriculum meetings, collaborative lesson-writing, assessment teams, in-house staff presentations, staff retreats, and so on. An administrator told us that the most important professional development activity in his building is "sit[ting] down and talk[ing] together to have the professional conversations, whereas they never use to do that." Likewise, a language arts teacher in another building suggested that "professional growth has been great" just through conversations and sharing ideas with colleagues. Nebraska educators are coming to see professional development as an ongoing, embedded part of their professional practice.

6) *External professional development remains largely uncoordinated.* While participants described a wide variety of external professional development activities, it seems that opportunities are taken by individuals as they arise ("I go to whatever comes up"), rather than as part of an overarching professional development program for the school. As one administrator told us, professional development in general is "kinda like a one-shot and then you run and try to put things together. It's not been sustained with the exception of Rick Stiggins." Indeed, teachers demonstrate little sense that they are engaged in a coherent professional development program, either for themselves or their school.

Continuing Challenges

1) *Time*. Again, this issue has more than one dimension. First, educators struggle to find the time they need to attend to professional development as they scramble to meet their manifold responsibilities. More than one mentioned the "double duty" of attending a professional development activity and preparing a lesson for a substitute. They also noted that responsible assessment and becoming a teacher-leader take time – which they do not have. Second, educators are aware that most professional development opportunities require time out of their classrooms. In other words, they see professional development as another force in competition for time with instruction. Administrators are particularly strident that teachers are *already* out of their classrooms too often.

2) *Deeply individualistic school culture*. Professional development, like teaching itself, has traditionally been perceived as an individual pursuit, not a collaborative effort. This is because most schools have been driven by individual needs and desires, rather than what is best for the building. As the principal quoted in Chapter 3 explained, in a school driven by individual needs and desires, we often hear, "'Oh, I'm interested in this, I'm interested in that." By contrast, a school driven by what is best for the school "moves together." It becomes a lab for ongoing, collaborative professional development. As we described in Chapter 3, many schools are struggling to break from established traditions of isolation and individualism. Until they do, professional development will be experienced as an individual, rather than shared, affair.

3) *Pre-packaged external professional development*. While the traditional inservice model – sometimes derisively called "pop in, pop off, pop out" or, as we have seen, "blow-and-go" – is falling out of favor among Nebraska administrators, professional development (in Nebraska, as elsewhere) remains largely unconnected to the realities and processes of everyday school life; it is not, as the participant indicated above, "sustained." Instead, it is pre-packaged, and rarely context-specific. Moreover, there is no mechanism in most schools whereby external professional development is cycled back into the school – into internal professional development and the SAA process in general. Instead, it remains a "special event" for the individual who attends.

4) *Money*. Financial resources continue to fall relatively low on participants' list of challenges. However, a growing number of educators report that money is becoming a serious concern. Increasingly, we are hearing that "there is not a whole lot of money to do a whole lot of things." Moreover, administrators worry that in the near future, their financial resources will be spread even thinner, thereby jeopardizing regular, high-quality professional development for their staff. State budget cuts and changes in the state aid formula have generated uncertainty and anxiety about the future of professional development for educators across the state.

Hallmarks of Effective Professional Development (for SAA)

1) *It is focused on **sustainability**.* Sustainability, as we define it in this report, involves the nurturance of a healthy environment with one eye on the present and the other on the future. We apply this concept here in two ways. First, professional development must sustain an environment for more, and more effective, professional development. In other words, there must be a sustainable *system* of professional development. Second, professional development must promote the sustainability of the SAA and school improvement processes to which it contributes. Successful workshops and meetings we

have observed involve teachers not only in creating a product, but also in creating a *process* to take back to (or continue in) their schools.

2) *It contributes to a culture of learning.* Effective professional development is first of all focused on *student* learning; it is organized around the goal of improving student performance. But it should also contribute to creating an environment in which educators wish to continue learning. For example, when teachers are placed in groups to learn from one another at a workshop, they will often leave the workshop eager for more interaction with teachers in their own building and district.

3) *It is cross-grade and cross-curricular*. Professional development should "leave no educator behind"; it should not focus solely on teachers in reporting grades and content areas. Effective professional development helps educators develop "whole-school" reforms, collaborating to improve the culture of the school, not just meet external mandates. The most successful work of this kind in Nebraska seems to be professional development related to the Statewide Writing Assessment. Many participants in our study laud the effective "whole-school" approach employed by Coordinator Sue Anderson and her colleagues.

4) *It models good instructional practice*. Workshops, professional meetings, and the like are at heart adult education. Professional development should use the same effective instructional practices that its providers hope teachers will use in their own classrooms. Like students in a classroom, teachers undergoing professional development will learn as much by *how* they are taught as by *what* they are taught. Again, we invoke Sue Anderson's work: in evaluations of six-trait writing workshops and scorer trainings, teachers often note that they get ideas for their own classrooms by watching the "teaching" of the training leaders.

5) *It is embedded (or embeddable) in an ongoing SAA process.* In other words, educators can connect the professional development to the practices of everyday school life. Too often, professional development is viewed as a "special opportunity" for an individual; what we have in mind here is professional development as tied to, and when possible part of, SAA and school improvement generally. As participants in our study tell us, informal professional development – regular meetings of the mathematics faculty to examine and discuss trends in assessment data, for instance – can be an effective means of sustaining the larger SAA process.

6) *It is data-informed, but not data-driven*. Effective professional development is informed by accurate, reliable data about, for instance, student performance. It focuses on what the data indicate to be strengths and weaknesses in a given school or district. But like the SAA process in general, professional development should not be driven by a single-minded desire to "improve the data"; it must account, too, for contextual features: teachers' goals, students' circumstances, etc. Professional development should take cues from data, but should not be mastered by them. In one school we visited, for instance, the language arts faculty examined together the assessment data (including NRTs and CRTs), and generated one major goal for the upcoming school year. Each teacher, in each grade, would design his/her curriculum to address this goal in a regular, systematic way throughout the school year.

7) *It is inquiry-based and interactive.* By "inquiry-based," we mean investigative or exploratory – an approach based on problem-posing and problem-solving. By

"interactive," we mean active and collaborative, generally using a team approach. This approach instills a collaborative spirit and promotes embeddable work, thereby supporting sustainability. Moreover, the learning theory is clear: people learn by doing. When we observe workshops and meetings in which information is simply delivered, we note that teachers quickly tune out. Conversely, when there is work for them to do, especially in groups, they are active, attentive, and involved. As we noted in last year's report, Assessment Coordinator Pat Roschewski is particularly adept at designing inquiry-based, interactive workshops. Indeed, all of the NDE-sponsored workshops and meetings we have attended have followed this pattern. This is less true of district and school workshops and meetings, where a "talking head" is often the center of attention.

8) *It focuses on **why**, as well as what and how*. This hallmark has both an intellectual and a political rationale. First, we know that adults, like children, learn best when they understand the *reason* for their learning – when they can connect it to a larger, meaningful activity (such as student learning or improved teaching). People are more likely to retain and apply knowledge if they can envisage "the big picture." Second, focusing on *why* makes political sense because it promotes "buy-in." We have found, for instance, that teachers are far more likely to engage enthusiastically in the SAA process when they understand 1) the larger purposes of SAA, and 2) what alternative models of SAA (especially standardized, high-stakes state tests) look like. We have heard again and again the same grumble from teachers at the beginning of workshops and meetings: "Why are we doing this?" The success of the session is invariably determined by whether or not that question is answered to the participants' satisfaction.

Chapter 5
Recommendations

II. Participants' Recommendations

Predictably, given our diverse sample of Nebraska schools, participants' recommendations for STARS ranged widely – from "leave us alone" to "give us a state test." However, when we examine these recommendations together, we see educators articulating several clear areas of need:

- Educators need *time* to fulfill their SAA responsibilities.
- Educators need "more realistic" reporting requirements from the state.
- Educators need clear, focused, and timely communication from the state.
- Educators need state and community responsiveness to local realities and challenges.
- Educators need a stable state SAA system.
- Educators need detailed guidance, including concrete examples, on how to improve their local SAA system.
- Educators need continued financial and moral support to continue their work on SAA.
- Educators need less political pressure as a result of competition and unfair comparisons.

The recommendations that follow attempt to honor our participants' sense of their needs, but they are drawn primarily from our own observations and analyses over the last two years.

III. Our Recommendations

The actions outlined in NDE's Strategic Action Plan (see Appendix K) represent significant advances in the STARS process; we applaud NDE for their responsiveness to our year one report. The action plan indicates that NDE has already begun addressing several needs identified in this report, including

- cross-grade and cross-curricular SAA processes
- integration of assessment and instruction
- assessment literacy among educators
- broader stakeholder engagement (including parents and communities)
- the needs of small schools[14]

[14] Although small schools are not mentioned in the Strategic Action Plan, they are receiving attention from NDE. On May 28, we attended a productive meeting, hosted by Pat Roschewski and facilitated by Norm Ronell of ESU 7, in which educators from small schools gathered to identify assessment issues facing small schools and potential solutions to those issues. The group generated an impressive list of ideas in five

All of these areas require continued attention. We also expect that NDE will continue to emphasize the following, which are bottom-line requirements for the sustainability of STARS:

- a reasonable timetable, with any changes introduced carefully and incrementally
- clear, focused, and timely communication with schools and districts
- high-quality university preservice programs
- high-quality state-sponsored professional development
- investment in local educators (resources for ongoing professional development)

We see ample evidence that NDE is, in fact, maintaining and in some cases enhancing its commitment in these areas. For instance, its work with higher education to continue its veteran teacher assessment cohort program (now in its third generation), to develop a set of preservice requirements for assessment literacy, and to initiate a one-of-a-kind graduate endorsement in assessment leadership speaks to NDE's significant investment in initial and ongoing professional development.

In this chapter, we recommend ways to extend and supplement the work NDE has already taken to improve STARS.

Additional recommendations for this year include the following:

1) *Continue to make adjustments, but not drastic changes*. One message is loud and clear through our two years of interviews: radical changes to the state's accountability system place an enormous burden on educators and communities and threaten to erode any support STARS has won among educators. Teachers and administrators understand that the system is evolving, and that adjustments must be made both to improve it and to comply with external demands, such as those imposed by the federal No Child Left Behind law (though very few educators understand the specifics of NCLB requirements). However, they are increasingly fearful that the federal law and changes at the state level will undermine local discretion and the work already accomplished or underway in Nebraska. Moreover, while Nebraska teachers are not subject to the kind of "reform sedimentation" we see in other states, where new burdens are continually added and existing ones never dropped, they certainly are beginning to feel the weight of accumulating demands. Continuing adjustments aside, it is crucial that the major components of the system remain as stable as possible. Whatever changes must be made, especially in reporting, must be instituted incrementally. As Dr. Bandalos suggests in Appendix J, test companies often take five years or more to develop and unveil a single test; Nebraska educators, likewise, need time to do the much more complex work of developing and implementing an entire local SAA process.

2) *Simplify reporting process*. We are convinced that the paperwork required by STARS is already onerous. And it stands to become even more so, in light of the state's shift to multiple reporting areas in single years, the fifth-grade reporting option, and new Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reporting requirements. Thus, we offer the following specific recommendations:

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areas: 1) communication, 2) assessment administration, 3) data management, 4) professional development, and 5) partnerships. We urge NDE to take action on these ideas.

- *allow for reporting on fewer standards*. NDE should determine that all schools will assess all standards, but *report* only on select standards.

- *streamline portfolio requirements*. NDE should revisit the reporting format for District Assessment Portfolios, reducing the amount of information required.

- *fold new reporting requirements, whenever possible, into existing reporting activities.* For instance, AYP data should be reported in concert with other state-reported data, even if schools are not required to report on standards in each reported area. The worst approach to AYP would be to announce an entirely new system consisting of reporting at grades 3, 5, 6, and a high school grade.

- *develop a user-friendly, online reporting template*. NDE should significantly decrease documentation time by designing a simple, easy-to-use grid or rubric for data entry.

- *circulate models of streamlined data reporting models.* NDE should share significantly detailed examples of districts' data reporting processes (including documentation pieces) that are concise and manageable. It is our sense that many districts put more time and effort into the reporting piece than is necessary; they can learn from their colleagues how to streamline their own processes.

3) *Focus professional development offerings on areas of special need.* Beyond helping districts and schools to offer the kind of quality professional development described in this report, the state should also target specific areas of need. According to our data, these are the following:

- *Quality criteria 5 and 6*. As we see again and again in the interviews, educators need assistance in understanding and measuring these two criteria. They need technical assistance, but also ways of *ensuring technical quality without compromising educational quality*. This leads to the next area of need.

- *Using existing curriculum and instruction to meet state standards.* One of the more worrisome findings of this year's research is that in some districts, innovative and effective projects are being cut in favor of teaching to a test (usually an ESU- or district-developed CRT). If achievement results are being prioritized over meaningful teaching and learning, then STARS is not fulfilling its promise. Districts need to see specific examples (models) in which existing local projects were used to measure student learning on state standards.

- *Models of effective SAA processes*. Again, schools and districts can learn from one another. They need to see what holistic, integrative, whole-school (cross-grade, cross-curricular) processes look like as they build their own such process. It is particularly important for schools to see examples of SAA processes that do not simply institute more tests. It is also important to take schools through the entire process, including documenting and reporting. For

instance, schools need to see example of multi-grade reporting so that they can shift the burden from reporting-grade teachers.

- *Engaging communities.* The "Know Your Schools" brochure described in the Strategic Action plan is a good start, but schools need more assistance in shaping and delivering their message locally. Leaders who have done this work successfully could share their engagement strategies with others.

4) *Move toward a more complex, rigorous, and authentic writing assessment*. We repeat this recommendation from last year's report, and we direct readers to our extensive critique of the current SWA in that report. Since the release of that document, the SWA has been extended, so that students in grades 4, 8, and 11 will be tested each year. This extension should not prove onerous; many districts are already administering their own test at multiple grade levels, and educators continue to identify the SWA as the least burdensome feature of STARS. NDE has also changed the scoring protocol so that only one scoring site will be used. We applaud this change, as it will quell concerns about the reliability of scoring across multiple sites. However, these changes do not mitigate the serious limitations of the SWA, and we believe we see evidence in the narrative comments to our writing survey (see Appendix F) that these limitations are becoming more obvious, and more frustrating, to Nebraska teachers as they become more knowledgeable about writing and the teaching of writing. A number of teachers we interviewed expressed similar concerns to those revealed by the survey. Some of these teachers proposed writing portfolios as an alternative to the timed impromptu exam. We direct readers to our thinking about this in last year's report. In the meantime, as the state moves the SWA to three concurrent reporting grades, it is likely that the growing disaffection for the test will be exacerbated. (Though it will continue to be tempered by teachers' generally warm regard for the six-trait writing program.) We continue to have every confidence in the good work of Coordinator Sue Anderson, but we reiterate our claim that the state's writing teachers are outgrowing this useful but seriously outdated program. Under these conditions, Ms. Anderson's services would be better utilized leading an overhaul of the SWA than presiding over an expansion of it.

5) *Sponsor a state "leaders of learning" council*. As detailed in the Strategic Action Plan, NDE is already working with Nebraska institutions of higher education to promote changes in the way future administrators and teacher-leaders are trained. This work is groundbreaking and should proceed apace. However, there is a serious need, as well, for ongoing professional exchange (face-to-face and electronic) among leaders, and especially principals. (Several loosely organized regional groups of administrators have already formed.) This council should not operate under a state mandate, and nor should it be a series of inservices. Rather, it should function as an ongoing professional development network, and should advise the Department in many areas, including STARS. Topics of discussion and shared research might include "Forming Healthy Partnerships with External Agencies," "Motivating Teacher Buy-In," and "Models of Leadership for Learning."

6) *Examine the validity and reliability of the accountability system*. Little work is going on nationally in this area, even though many current state accountability systems were spawned by legal challenges to educational equity. STARS is under increasing political (and perhaps soon legal) pressure, and there is an urgent need to establish its validity and reliability. At present, STARS enjoys provisional and general acceptance by federal policymakers and some local stakeholders; this favor will not last without continuing

assurances that STARS is helping ensure a quality education for all Nebraska children. Many of the technical aspects of the system, therefore, will need to be examined. The sufficiency study we have begun with the Buros Center is a step in this direction (see Appendix H); in the coming year, we will work with the Department to identify other reliability and validity issues for further inquiry.

7) *Commission an audit of the involvement of Educational Services Units in STARS.* Many districts and schools are receiving invaluable support and resources from their ESU; others are not served as well by theirs. Of particular concern is the perception among what appears to be a growing number of teachers that ESUs are driving assessment, and therefore curriculum and instruction. This is a serious problem in small schools, where the lack of resources, time, or an assessment coordinator puts pressure on the school to consort or otherwise rely heavily on their ESU. We propose an independent examination of how ESUs support schools for SAA.

8) *Help all schools, but especially small and rural schools, protect and enhance locally-meaningful education.* In many schools, as we note throughout this report, effective and meaningful projects and programs are being cut in favor of more easily tested material. Much place-based education, for instance, is being cut in small communities because it does not "fit into" an ESU-designed CRT. As we suggest in Chapter 1, at stake here is nothing less than the survival of some small communities. The state's unique system was built in part to preserve the unique circumstances of Nebraska's small schools. However, educators in these schools are having a difficult time protecting what is unique in their curriculum and instruction as they seek to comply with the demands of STARS. The Department should help them understand how to do so, sharing models of schools that are successfully protecting and enhancing locally-meaningful education, for instance, and running the kinds of workshops we describe in #3 above.

9) *Adjust/amplify the message*. The Department must send several messages to schools, communities, and especially the media:

    - *Local decision-making is right for Nebraska*. We understand from the Strategic Action Plan that NDE representatives continue to make presentations across the state and nationally on the rationale for STARS. Even so, few of our study participants understand the philosophical and intellectual underpinnings of STARS. They would benefit, in particular, from a contrastive understanding of what Nebraska is doing (relative, that is, to the routes other states have chosen). Moreover, participants report that their communities have very little understanding of the system. In an era in which the federal government is attempting to make uniformity and standardization "common sense," Nebraska officials must vigorously and continually articulate the "big picture." This will also be crucial as pressure is ratcheted up on the state's funding system. Other states – Kentucky and Massachusetts perhaps most visible among them – have instituted high-stakes state tests in response to legal challenges to school equity. If Nebraska is not to go the same route, it must prove that STARS does, in fact, ensure equitable education for all Nebraska students.

    - *Unfair and inappropriate comparisons must be avoided.* NDE should undertake a vigorous campaign to educate the media, the general public, and perhaps especially local school boards about the dangers of unfair and

inappropriate comparisons. As some of our participants remind us, in our competitive culture, some people will always want to rank schools. However, we believe most Nebraskans can in fact be educated on this topic, and to think otherwise is to underestimate them. NDE should educate people on the difference between rating and rankings, and should send a clear message that in a system such as STARS, meaningful comparisons are not between schools/districts, but between a school's or districts' results *last year* and *this year*, taking into account the relevant circumstances (mobility rate, poverty, staff turnover, identified goals, etc.). This is not to say that stakeholders should look for excuses for poor performance; on the contrary, they need to take a rigorous look at the whole picture, with an eye always toward sustained and regular growth. NDE needs to send a clear and consistent message that the purpose of accountability under STARS is not to keep score, but to keep improving.

- *NCLB will not undermine the work already completed or underway in Nebraska*. As we examine two years of data, one of the most pronounced trends is a growing fear among Nebraska educators that NCLB will render irrelevant the work they have done on their SAA processes. We acknowledge that Commissioner Christensen's message here has been clear: the state will negotiate into its system those features of NCLB that do not violate the principles of STARS. As he holds to his vision, he and his staff must tirelessly assure educators across the state that STARS is "here to stay" and that their hard work "counts." If the system is to win popular support, victories, such as provisional federal approval for the system, must be touted, and allies, such as Nebraska's congressional delegation and the *Lincoln Journal-Star*, must be courted and enlisted to speak out on behalf of the system.

- *STARS does not require **more testing***. We note that thriving districts and schools are often testing *less* as their SAA process comes into focus. All stakeholders, but especially educators, must understand the difference between assessment and testing. In particular, they must understand that pencil-and-paper, end-of-unit tests are *not* the only way to assess. Again, integrative, holistic processes may be modeled in professional development venues. But the Department should also send the message as often as it is able that STARS is not about adding tests, but about embedding assessment in strong local curriculum and instruction.

Appendix A
Institutional Review Board Approval

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Appendix B
The Researchers

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Appendix C
The Advisory Committee

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Appendix D
Methodology

This study employs both quantitative and qualitative research methods in order to ensure the validity of our results. In this appendix, we describe our methodology.

Quantitative: Mail Surveys

We conducted two mail surveys: one on instructional practices and teachers' perceptions of mathematics assessments and one on the instructional practices and teachers' perceptions of the Statewide Writing Assessment (SWA).

Survey Design
The research team designed both instruments through several stages of review. First, an advisory committee composed of Nebraska Department of Education staff, University of Nebraska-Lincoln faculty, teachers, and administrators reviewed the instruments for content (see Appendix C for a list of committee members). Second, the staff at the Nebraska Evaluation and Assessment Research Center reviewed the instruments for technical quality. Finally, using read-aloud protocols and informal debriefing interviews, we piloted both questionnaires with small groups of teachers who met the sample criteria.

Samples
The mathematics survey required complex sampling; see Dr. Mickelson's sampling plan below. Teachers in each Educational Service Unit (ESU) were included in both the elementary and secondary samples. Moreover, teachers in 191 districts were included in the elementary sample, and teachers in 224 districts were included in the secondary sample.

By contrast, sampling for the writing survey was straightforward. Because we wanted to hear from teachers who were conducting the SWA this year, we sent a survey to every eighth-grade language arts teacher in the NDE database. Therefore, teachers in all ESUs and from every district that had a language arts teacher in a school with an eighth-grade were included in the sample.

Protocol
Questionnaires were mailed to teachers at their school addresses, using the most current NDE teacher database. The questionnaires were accompanied by a postage-paid, self-addressed envelope and a letter with information on the Comprehensive Evaluation Project (CEP) and participants' rights as research subjects, under Institutional Review Board guidelines (see Appendix A). Participants were given approximately two months to complete and return the questionnaire. As the return deadline approached, all potential respondents who had not yet returned their questionnaires were sent a reminder letter.

Response Rates
Of the 1,515 mathematics questionnaires mailed to teachers, we received 591 responses, for a response rate of 39%.

Of the 590 writing questionnaires mailed to teachers, we received 242 responses, for a response rate of 41%.

Accounting for nonresponse
Correspondence from teachers who chose not to complete questionnaires suggests several possible reasons for nonresponse:

Both Surveys:

- *Teacher is no longer in position*. Several teachers were no longer in the position that placed them in our sample. They or their colleagues reported that they had left the school, or had switched positions within it.
- *Teacher's subject area is misidentified in database.* A handful of teachers reported that they taught in a subject area unrelated to the sample, despite their identification in the NDE database.
- *Teacher doesn't feel free to share opinion*. A couple teachers reported discomfort with responding candidly to the questions. Several respondents damaged or erased tracking information used by the researchers (numbers or labels on surveys).
- *Length of questionnaire*. Both instruments are fairly lengthy. With teacher time in short supply, this may contribute to nonresponse.
- *Content Considerations*. Response rates are always influenced by participants' motivation to answer the questions. Standards and assessment are topics that generate a variety of responses, including perhaps withdrawal.

Writing Survey

- *Teacher teaches language arts, but not writing*. Several teachers reported teaching language arts, but not specifically writing. They reported no direct connection to the SWA.
- *Teacher teaches writing in seventh grade, not eighth*. A few teachers reported teaching writing only in seventh grade, and so they did not administer the SWA. The NDE database did not allow us to distinguish between seventh- and eighth-grade teachers.

Respondents
For both surveys, the number of responses was roughly proportionate to the population of teachers by region and district class. That is, the majority of the responses were from the eastern region of the state, with somewhat fewer from the central region, and fewer still from the western region. (Note: only those with valid data reported below; percentages are rounded and may not equal 100.)

Math

Region	f	%
Eastern	383	69
Central	116	21
Western	55	10

Writing		
Region	**f**	**%**
Eastern	141	62
Central	62	27
Western	23	10

Similarly, the majority of the responses on both surveys were from Class 3 school districts, with the fewest responses from Class 1 and Class 6.

Math		
District class	**f**	***%***
1	22	*4*
2	15	*3*
3	384	*69*
4	58	*10*
5	65	*12*
6	10	*2*

Writing		
District Class	**f**	**%**
1	2	*1*
2	12	*5*
3	178	*79*
4	14	*6*
5	16	*7*
6	4	*2*

For the math survey, roughly the same number of elementary and middle/secondary teachers returned the survey, with a strong distribution across grades 1-12.

GRADE TAUGHT	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1	41	7.13	7.13
2	35	6.09	13.22
3	49	8.52	21.74
4	54	9.39	31.13
5	27	4.70	35.83
6	29	5.04	40.87
7	33	5.74	46.61
8	34	5.91	52.52
9	1	0.17	52.70
12	1	0.17	52.87
Elementary	19	3.30	56.17

Middle school	40	6.96	63.13
High school	212	36.87	100
Total	575	100	

Math respondents had an average of almost 17 years of teaching experience. On average, they had attended 2.5 professional development activities related to math standards and assessment in the last year.

For the writing survey, respondents had an average of 17 years of teaching experience. On average, they had attended almost 3 professional development activities related to writing standards and assessment in the last year.

Data Analysis
Statistical analysis was conducted by the Nebraska Evaluation and Research Center, under the supervision of Dr. William Mickelson, consultant to the CEP. Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations were run using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Qualitative
The qualitative portion of the study consisted of 73 interviews with 132 teachers and administrators in 23 schools located in 15 districts across the state. Equipment difficulties led to a loss of audio data from nine interviews (at five schools). In all but three cases, we used detailed research notes to reconstruct the interviews. In three additional cases, portions of audio data were lost due to equipment malfunction.

Interview Design
The unit of analysis for the interview portion of the study was the school. We wanted to know how various people within each school were experiencing and responding to STARS. Thus, in consultation with our advisory committee, the research team designed a set of open-ended interview questions for four sets of participants (see Appendix E):

- Building administrators
- Assessment coordinators or learning teams
- Mathematics teachers
- Language arts teachers

Some questions are repeated across the interviews for the purpose of comparison; others are tailored to the position held by the participant. Although we did not "pilot" the interviews, we collected feedback on the questions from people holding each of the positions.

The Sample
Because we wanted to know how schools in a variety of circumstances are experiencing and responding to STARS, the research team – again in consultation with our advisory committee – chose a "maximum variation sample."[15] We chose schools based on the following characteristics:

- School size

[15] Hatch p. 50.

- District size
- Geographic region
- Student demographics
- Ratings of the state Report Card (Mathematics and Language Arts)

Four schools included in this year's sample were also included in last year's study.

Here is a brief composite portrait of our participating schools:

- *Number of schools, districts*: 23 schools in 15 districts
- *Size of district*: 7 small, 5 medium, 3 large
- *Type of community*: 7 rural, 6 suburban, 2 urban
- *Geographic region*: 7 eastern, 5 central, 3 western
- *Type of school*: 9 elementary, 6 middle, 7 high school, 1 k-12
- *Student diversity*: 10 schools with moderate or high diversity
- *Free/reduced lunch*: 7 schools with more than 50% of students receiving free/reduced lunch
- *Mobility*: 6 schools with more mobility rates of 25% or more
- *Achievement on math standards*: 6 schools with fewer than 60% of students meeting standards; 5 schools with more than 80% meeting standards

Protocol
Once schools were identified, we used an identical protocol with each:

- Contact district superintendent for permission to conduct study
- File IRB protocol change form, adding district to study
- Arrange interview schedule with principal or assessment coordinator
- Conduct interviews:
    - Introduce project, IRB protections
    - Have participants fill out informed consent forms and information sheet
    - Ask for permission to audio record interviews
    - Ask questions; audiotape and take notes
    - Thank participants for time; share contact information
    - Transcribe interviews

Interviews ranged from twenty minutes to one hour; they averaged 30-40 minutes. Both focus group and one-on-one interviews were conducted. No incentives were offered to participants.

We conducted 73 interviews in all. Here is a composite portrait of our interviewees:

- *Total Participants:* 132
- *Teachers:* 100
- *Principals:* 17
- *Superintendents*: 4
- *Other district or school administration*: 3
- *Assessment Coordinators or Program Specialists*: 8

Of the teachers, the grade-level breakdown looked like this:

- *Kindergarten:* 2 teachers
- *First grade:* 6
- *Second Grade:* 7
- *Third Grade:* 4
- *Fourth Grade:* 5
- *Fifth Grade:* 7
- *Sixth Grade:* 11
- *Seventh Grade:* 11
- *Eighth Grade:* 11
- *Multiple Elementary Grades:* 4
- *Multiple Middle School Grades:* 3
- *Multiple High School Grades:* 27
- *Multiple Middle and High School Grades:* 2

Fifty-three (53) of these teachers were language arts teachers, and forty-seven (47) were mathematics teachers.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis is similar to "typological analysis"[16] in which the researcher identifies typologies (topics); codes and organizes data according to typology; looks for patterns within the typologies; looks for nonexamples of patterns; looks for relationships among patterns; generalizes about each pattern; and selects data excerpts to support generalizations. It also borrows strategies from Huberman and Miles (1994) and Cresswell (1998), such as multiple readings of the data, marginal notes, and summary sheets.[17] In general, we "spiraled" through the data, using Cresswell's (1998) procedures of data managing, reading, interpreting, classifying, describing, and representing.[18] Topics and related questions were drawn from the interview questions, but in some cases combined or renamed. They were as follows:

- ***Process:*** How do participants describe who did what when? What are the key features of the process described?
- ***Leadership***: How do leaders describe their activities, roles, and challenges? What do they suggest is most important about leadership under STARS?
- ***Curriculum***: What changes to curriculum, if any, are described? Note math, writing, language arts.
- ***Instruction***: What changes to instruction, if any, are described? Note math, writing, language arts.
- ***Professional Development***: What kinds of professional development are described (include administrators)? How is professional development supported? How useful has it been? What is the state of teachers' and administrators' assessment literacy?
- ***Communication***: (How) Do participants describe communication between teachers/schools and districts, ESUs, other schools/districts, communities, etc.?

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[16] See Hatch (2002).

[17] A.M. Huberman &M.B. Miles, "Data Management and Analysis Methods." In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994). pp. 428-444.; John W. Cresswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998).

[18] Cresswell, p. 143

- ***Communication***: (How) Do participants describe communication among teachers, districts, districts and ESUs, schools and communities, etc.?
- ***Challenges/Needs***: What do participants identify as their major challenges or needs as they work on STARS/assessment?
- ***Benefits***: What do participants identify as the major benefits of STARS/assessments?
- ***Student Learning/Achievement***: (How) Do participants describe effects of STARS/assessments on student learning/achievement?
- ***Perceptions***: What do participants think of STARS? How do they feel about the process? What are they excited about, and what worries them?
- ***Recommendations***: What recommendations, if any, do participants have for improving STARS?

Our data analysis steps were as follows:

1. **Identify topics and related questions to be analyzed.**

2. **Read the data, coding entries as they relate to each topic.** Using a highlighter, marginal notes, and a simple coding device, we identified passages in the transcripts that addressed each topic.

3. **Organize data by topic.** Summary statements and illustrative excerpts were pulled from transcripts and organized in summary sheets for each topic.

4. **Look for patterns, relationships, and themes within topics.** Each summary sheet was examined for trends in the data.

5. **Look for nonexamples of identified patterns, relationships, and themes.** Each summary sheet was examined for examples that contradicted the identified trends or pointed to alternative explanations.

6. **Look for patterns, relationships, and themes among topics.** The summary sheets were examined vis-à-vis one another for trends.

7. **Write summary statements for each topic, identifying key patterns, relationships, and themes.** These statements were used as the basis and organizational device for this report – though again topics were in some cases combined and renamed.

TECHNICAL REPORT:

DESCRIPTIVE SUMMARY OF SELECTION TECHNIQUES FOR THE SCHOOL-BASED, TEACHER-LED ASSESSMENT AND REPORTING SYSTEM

Prepared by
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The following is a technical and descriptive summary of the methods and procedures used to select a random and representative sample of elementary and secondary (including middle school) teachers in the state of Nebraska. These teachers are selected for inclusion and possible participation in the School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS) project. The goal of the sampling procedure was to obtain, from a list of 7567 elementary teachers and 1258 secondary school teachers, a random and representative sample of 800 secondary and 700 elementary school teachers. The sample selection process for elementary and secondary teachers will be discussed separately.

Specifically, elementary school teachers for whom the state reporting system indicated a single grade teaching responsibility (1st grade through 6th grade) were retained in those grades. Similarly, teachers who the state reporting system indicated multiple grade teaching responsibilities were combined into a seventh category. Primary teachers who the state reporting system indicated responsibility for teaching pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten, or 7th grade and above were excluded from the selection process. Random samples of teachers from the seven categories were selected such that their proportional representation was maintained. For example, if 758 teachers of the 7567 total (10%) teachers taught 1st grade, then 80 of the final 800 teachers selected teach 1st grade.

Secondary teachers indicated by the state reporting system to be associated with teaching junior high or middle school were combined into a first category. Similarly, senior high (grade 9-12 and grade 10-12) affiliated teachers were combined to form a second category. Finally, teachers with grades 7-12 affiliations comprised the third category. The same proportional representation sampling procedures were used as with elementary school teachers. Tables 1 and 2 give a frequency distribution of the cities in Nebraska from which the samples were selected, tables 3 and 4 provide a frequency count of the educational service units selected, and tables 5 and 6 show frequency totals of school districts selected for elementary and secondary teachers, respectively.

HARD COPIES OF TABLES AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST.

Appendix E
The Research Instruments

HARD COPIES AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST.

Appendix F
Analyses of Statewide Writing Assessment Survey

In this Appendix, we analyze the results of the Statewide Writing Assessment (SWA) survey (see Appendix D for our methodology and Appendix E for a copy of the survey). We begin by identifying major findings. We then present tables including each survey item. We end with an analysis of the narrative comments on the SWA survey.

Major Findings:

Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Practices
We asked teachers to indicate whether the SWA had caused them to place more emphasis, the same emphasis, or less emphasis on a range of classroom practices. [Table 1]

For the most part, *the SWA has had little effect on emphases in writing instruction.* In almost all cases, that is, the majority of responses fall under "same emphasis."

The most pronounced exceptions, perhaps not surprisingly, involve assessment and six-trait writing:

- 65% placed more emphasis on practice assessments
- 73% placed more emphasis on sharing assessment criteria in class
- 73% placed more emphasis on explicit instruction in six trait writing

We also see more emphasis on writing as a process (47%), and on revision (40%) and proofreading/editing (33%).

By contrast, 1/3 of respondents placed *less* emphasis on publishing writing (class books, displays, etc.), and 37% place less emphasis on freewriting.

Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Experiences with the SWA
We asked teachers a variety of questions regarding their students' experiences with the SWA. [Table 2]

It is important to remember, when reading the results of this section of the survey, that we are measuring *teachers' perceptions* of students' experiences, not the experiences themselves, or students' perceptions of them.

In general, *teachers perceive that students do their best work on the SWA and are motivated to do well.* (Approximately 50% for both questions answered that all or most of their students fit this profile, while another approximately 35% believe that some of their students fall in these categories.) At the same time, *they also perceive that at least some of their students experience anxiety about the SWA.* (78% marked "some," "most," or "all.")

Our questions about the writing prompt and the time constraints of the exam reveal that teachers believe some students have trouble with both. However, the numbers for items 22 and 23 as well as items 24 and 25 are similar enough that we can draw no conclusions about whether teachers believe students overall find the prompt too narrow or broad or if they find the sessions too long or too short. Moreover, relatively few teachers marked "most" or "all" for these items.

Teachers' Perceptions of the SWA
We asked teachers a number of questions about their perceptions of the SWA. [Table 3]

Although they experience anxiety about the results of the SWA, teachers have positive perceptions of it overall. Seventy-nine percent (79%) of teachers strongly agreed or agreed that the results of the SWA cause anxiety for teachers. At the same time,

- 88% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the six traits scoring rubric is useful for instruction
- 75% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the SWA supports learning objectives they have for their students
- 72% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the results of the SWA are useful for teachers
- 65% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the six traits are the most important features of writing

Teacher opinion is split on a number of items, including whether the SWA promotes higher-level thinking, whether the SWA has improved student writing, and whether the state's reporting system is fair.

Readers may note the low ratings on questions regarding ELL and SPED guidelines. For instance, only 37% agreed or strongly agreed that accommodation/inclusion guidelines for ELL are clear, and only 28% agreed or strongly agreed that they are fair. However, it is important to consider the frequency of responses in the "Don't Know" and "NA" categories for these items. That is, the number of teachers marking "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" may be low because a significant number of teachers simply do not work with ELL (or SPED) students. Note that only 18% disagreed or strongly disagreed on item 38a and only 16% disagreed or strongly disagreed on item 38b. While this may be an area to watch, these findings are inconclusive at best.

One item does seem to send a clearer message: only 25% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the SWA promotes writing across the curriculum. Indeed, a much larger percent – 55 – disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Teachers' Perceptions of their Professional Development
We asked teachers three questions about their confidence in their abilities and their professional development. [Table 4]

Here we find that *teachers are confident in their abilities as writing teachers, believe they have had adequate opportunities to learn about writing standards and assessment, and feel strongly supported in their professional development by their administration.*

Specifically:

- 89% agreed or strongly agreed that they are confident in their abilities as writing teachers
- 84% agreed or strongly agreed that they have had adequate opportunities to learn about writing standards and assessment
- 85% agreed or strongly agreed that their administration strongly supports their professional development

On average, teachers reported having attending just less than three professional development activities involving standards and assessment in the last year.

Teachers' Perceptions of Teacher Communication with Other Groups
We asked teachers a series of questions about how the SWA affects communication between teachers and other groups. [Table 5]

In general, *communication between teachers and other groups has not been affected drastically by the SWA.*

The only minor exceptions are

- between teachers and students, where 45% reported somewhat better or much better communication
- between teachers and other teachers, where 55% reported somewhat better or much better communication
- between teachers and ESUs, where 53% reported somewhat better or much better communication

Coda: Two Interesting Findings That May Warrant Further Study
We conducted statistical analyses (chi-square tests, Pearson correlations, ANOVAs, Welch's tests, and t-tests) to break responses down on selected items by region, district class, years of teaching experience, number of professional development activities, and highest degree earned. (Note that most analyses were conducted with out the Don't Know and Not Applicable options in, but the results were the same as when they were left in.) Few statistically significant findings emerged (at the .05 level). Among these, the following may warrant further investigation:

- teachers in the central part of the state were more likely to agree that the SWA creates an important learning opportunity, and teachers from the western part of the state were more likely to disagree with this statement [Table 6]

- teachers from the eastern part of the state attended more professional development activities than did teachers from the central part of the state [Table 7]

Table 1: Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Practices

Item*	More Emphasis	Same Emphasis	Less Emphasis	Don't Know	NA
1 Writing as a process	109	114	6		1
	47.39	*49.57*	*2.61*		*0.43*
2 Class discussion	41	154	32		2
	17.90	*67.25*	*13.97*		*0.87*
3 Student choice of topics	24	135	69	2	
	10.43	*58.70*	*30.00*	*0.87*	
4 Free writing	34	106	86	3	1
	14.78	*46.09*	*37.39*	*1.30*	*0.43*
5 Informal/ungraded writing	47	107	67	2	6
	20.52	*46.72*	*29.26*	*0.87*	*2.62*
6 Sharing assessment criteria in class	168	54	3	2	3
	73.04	*23.48*	*1.30*	*0.87*	*1.30*
7 Prewriting	68	154	7		1
	29.57	*66.96*	*3.04*		*0.43*
8 Drafting	70	154	6		
	30.43	*66.96*	*2.61*		
9 Revision	91	133	6		
	39.57	*57.83*	*2.61*		
10 Peer editing/feedback/ response	70	127	32	1	
	30.43	*55.22*	*13.91*	*0.43*	
11 Proofreading/editing	76	151	3		
	33.04	*65.65*	*1.30*		
12 Conferencing with students	42	153	28		6
	18.34	*66.81*	*12.23*		*2.62*
13 Teacher response/feedback to writing	59	155	14		2
	25.65	*67.39*	*6.09*		*0.87*
14 Practice assessments	150	61	6	4	9
	65.22	*26.52*	*2.61*	*1.74*	*3.91*
15 Publishing writing (class books, displays, etc.)	13	122	77	4	14
	5.65	*53.04*	*33.48*	*1.74*	*6.09*
i16 Involving students in assessments of own work	90	120	15		5
	39.13	*52.17*	*6.52*		*2.17*
17 Explicit instruction in six trait writing	168	55	5		2
	73.04	*23.91*	*2.17*		*0.87*

* First value is frequency of responses. Values italicized are percent of responses.

Table 2: Teachers' Perceptions of Students Experiences with the SWA

Item*	All	Most	Some	Few	None	Don't Know	NA
18 Students do their best work on the Statewide Writing Assessment	8	107	77	30	2	6	
	3.48	*46.52*	*33.48*	*13.04*	*0.87*	*2.61*	
19 Students are motivated to do well on the Statewide Writing Assessment	14	107	86	18	3	2	
	6.09	*46.52*	*37.39*	*7.83*	*1.30*	*0.87*	
20 Students experience anxiety about taking the Statewide Writing Assessment	19	70	98	36	4	3	
	8.26	*30.43*	*42.61*	*15.65*	*1.74*	*1.30*	
21 Students find the writing prompt easy to answer	5	101	84	31	1	7	1
	2.17	*43.91*	*36.52*	*13.48*	*0.43*	*3.04*	*0.43*
22 Students find the writing prompt too narrow in focus	1	12	89	78	38	11	1
	0.43	*5.22*	*38.70*	*33.91*	*16.52*	*4.78*	*0.43*
23 Students find the writing prompt too broad in focus	3	23	91	78	21	12	1
	1.31	*10.04*	*39.74*	*34.06*	*9.17*	*5.24*	*0.44*
24 Students find the two 40-minute sessions too short	12	43	76	71	19	7	1
	5.24	*18.78*	*33.19*	*31.00*	*8.30*	*3.06*	*0.44*
25 Students find the two 40-minute sessions too long	1	10	71	94	43	6	2
	0.44	*4.41*	*31.28*	*41.41*	*18.94*	*2.64*	*0.88*

* First value is frequency of responses. Values italicized are percent of responses.

Table 3: Teachers' Perceptions of the SWA

Item*	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know	NA
26 The Statewide Writing Assessment promotes higher-level thinking in students	13	70	65	46	30	5	1
	5.65	*30.43*	*28.26*	*20.00*	*13.04*	*2.17*	*0.43*
27 The Statewide Writing Assessment holds students to high writing standards	24	122	38	32	11	3	
	10.43	*53.04*	*16.52*	*13.91*	*4.78*	*1.30*	
28 The Statewide Writing Assessment supports the learning objectives I have for my students	32	141	29	23	5		
	13.91	*61.30*	*12.61*	*10.00*	*2.17*		
29 Student writing has improved as a result of the Statewide Writing Assessment	16	62	61	57	16	18	
	6.96	*26.96*	*26.52*	*24.78*	*6.96*	*7.83*	
30 The Statewide Writing Assessment accurately assesses what I teach	14	72	59	56	23	5	1
	6.09	*31.30*	*25.65*	*24.35*	*10.00*	*2.17*	*0.43*
31 The Statewide Writing Assessment creates an important learning opportunity for students	13	74	62	60	18	3	
	5.65	*32.17*	*26.96*	*26.09*	*7.83*	*1.30*	
32 The mode of writing (descriptive) is appropriate for eighth-grade students	53	139	9	12	14	2	1
	23.04	*60.43*	*3.91*	*5.22*	*6.09*	*0.87*	*0.43*
33 The scoring procedure is fair	18	91	45	38	20	17	
	7.86	*39.74*	*19.65*	*16.59*	*8.73*	*7.42*	
34 The six traits scoring rubric is useful for instruction	72	131	14	9	3		
	31.44	*57.21*	*6.11*	*3.93*	*1.31*		
35 The state's reporting system is fair	13	60	64	38	22	32	
	5.68	*26.20*	*27.95*	*16.59*	*9.61*	*13.97*	
36 The results of the Statewide Writing Assessment generate anxiety among teachers	89	91	22	19	3	5	
	38.86	*39.74*	*9.61*	*8.30*	*1.31*	*2.18*	

37a The results of the Statewide Writing Assessment are useful for schools	25 *10.96*	129 *56.58*	36 *15.79*	27 *11.84*	8 *3.51*	3 *1.32*	
37b The results of the Statewide Writing Assessment are useful for community/parents	14 *6.17*	88 *38.77*	55 *24.23*	46 *20.26*	13 *5.73*	10 *4.41*	1 *0.44*
37c The results of the Statewide Writing Assessment are useful for teachers	39 *17.11*	128 *56.14*	24 *10.53*	22 *9.65*	11 *4.82*	4 *1.75*	
37d The results of the Statewide Writing Assessment are useful for the district	24 *10.53*	116 *50.88*	40 *17.54*	33 *14.47*	10 *4.39*	5 *2.19*	
37e The results of the Statewide Writing Assessment are useful for the state	22 *9.69*	93 *40.97*	51 *22.47*	37 *16.30*	13 *5.73*	11 *4.85*	
37f The results of the Statewide Writing Assessment are useful for students	21 *9.25*	104 *45.81*	34 *14.98*	41 *18.06*	22 *9.69*	5 *2.20*	
38a The accommodations/inclusion guidelines for ELL are clear to me	3 *1.33*	81 *35.84*	27 *11.95*	33 *14.60*	7 *3.10*	27 *11.95*	48 *21.24*
38b The accommodations/inclusion guidelines for ELL are fair	5 *2.26*	57 *25.79*	44 *19.91*	29 *13.12*	7 *3.17*	34 *15.38*	45 *20.36*
39a The accommodations/inclusion guidelines for SPED students are clear to me	9 3.98	107 47.35	33 14.60	38 16.81	11 4.87	19 8.41	9 3.98
39b The accommodations/inclusion guidelines for SPED students are fair	6 *2.74*	84 *38.36*	40 *18.26*	40 *18.26*	13 *5.94*	28 *12.79*	8 *3.65*
40 The Statewide Writing Assessment promotes writing across the curriculum	12 *5.26*	45 *19.74*	43 *18.86*	85 *37.28*	40 *17.54*	3 *1.32*	
41 My teaching has improved as a result of the Statewide Writing Assessment	19 *8.33*	72 *31.58*	59 *25.88*	48 *21.05*	30 *13.16*		
42 I spend more time on writing than I did before the Statewide Writing Assessment	31 *13.60*	74 *32.46*	46 *20.18*	57 *25.00*	20 *8.77*		
43 The six traits are the most important features of writing	43 *18.86*	104 *45.61*	48 *21.05*	22 *9.65*	10 *4.39*	1 *0.44*	

* First value is frequency of responses. Values italicized are percent of responses.

Table 4: Teachers' Perceptions of their Professional Development

Item*	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know	NA
44 I am confident in my ability as a writing teacher	75 *32.89*	127 *55.70*	20 *8.77*	6 *2.63*			
45 I have had adequate opportunity (workshops, trainings, in-services) to learn about writing assessment and standards	70 *30.70*	124 *54.39*	21 *9.21*	12 *5.26*	1 *0.44*		
46 My administration strongly supports my professional development	80 *35.09*	113 *49.56*	26 *11.40*	6 *2.63*	3 *1.32*		

* First value is frequency of responses. Values italicized are percent of responses.

Table 5: Teachers' Perceptions of Communication Between Teachers and Other Groups

Item*	Much Better	Somewhat Better	Same	Somewhat Worse	Much Worse	Don't Know	NA
47a Administrators	12	63	133	9	3	6	1
	5.29	*27.75*	*58.59*	*3.96*	*1.32*	*2.64*	*0.44*
47b Students	22	79	114	4	3	3	2
	9.69	*34.80*	*50.22*	*1.76*	*1.32*	*1.32*	*0.88*
47c Parents	6	28	170	7	4	10	2
	2.64	*12.33*	*74.89*	*3.08*	*1.76*	*4.41*	*0.88*
47d Local community		14	165	23	4	18	3
		6.17	*72.69*	*10.13*	*1.76*	*7.93*	*1.32*
47e Other teachers	25	91	102	5	1	2	1
	11.01	*40.09*	*44.93*	*2.20*	*0.44*	*0.88*	*0.44*
47f Educational Service Units	32	88	76	4	2	22	3
	14.10	*38.77*	*33.48*	*1.76*	*0.88*	*9.69*	*1.32*
47g Nebraska Department of Education	10	51	106	12	5	39	4
	4.41	*22.47*	*46.70*	*5.29*	*2.20*	*17.18*	*1.76*
47h Higher education institutions	1	14	136	4	1	67	4
	0.44	*6.17*	*59.91*	*1.76*	*0.44*	*29.52*	*1.76*

* First value is frequency of responses. Values italicized are percent of responses.

Table 6: Region by The SWA Creates an Important Learning Opportunity for Students (item 31)

		Item 31						
Region		**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Don't Know**	**Total**
East	Count	8	43	37	37	12	0	137
	% within Region	5.84	31.39	27.01	27.01	8.76	0.00	100.00
	% of Total	3.60	19.37	16.67	16.67	5.41	0.00	61.71
Central	Count	2	27	15	15	1	3	63
	% within Region	3.17	42.86	23.81	23.81	1.59	4.76	100.00
	% of Total	0.90	12.16	6.76	6.76	0.45	1.35	28.38
West	Count	3	3	9	6	1	0	22
	% within Region	13.64	13.64	40.91	27.27	4.55	0.00	100.00
	% of Total	1.35	1.35	4.05	2.70	0.45	0.00	9.91
Total	Count	13	73	61	58	14	3	222
	% within item 31	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
	% of Total	5.86	32.88	27.48	26.13	6.31	1.35	100.00

From this table, it appears that the differences between regions are in their preferences for the agree or disagree response options. Those teachers from the central region of NE show a higher proportion agreeing that SWA creates an important learning opportunity for students rather than disagreeing with this claim, whereas teachers from the West region of NE show a higher proportion disagreeing that SWA creates an important learning opportunity for students rather than agreeing that it does. – *MT, NEAR Center*

Table 7: Welch Test for Regional Differences on Number of Professional Development Activities Attended (item 51)

Variable	Region										
	East			Central			West			Welch	
Variable	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*N*	F (2, 53)	Partial Eta Squared
Number of Professional Development Activities Attended	**3.08**	2.13	119	**2.33**	1.31	57	2.95	1.76	20	4.22*	0.03

Note: Because the Assumption of Homogeneity of Variances was not tenable, means were tested for statistical significance using the Welch test statistic. – *MT, NEAR Center*

*Statistically significant at the .05 significance level; regional means in bold were statistically different from each other based on the Games-Howell test statistic. – *MT, NEAR Center*

Analysis of Narrative Comments on Writing Assessment Questionnaire

At the end of the Statewide Writing Assessment (SWA) questionnaire, we asked respondents the following question: "Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the Statewide Writing Assessment?" One hundred thirty-six respondents (roughly 56% of the total) chose to use the short space provided to offer a comment.

Results based solely on unprompted narrative comments at the end of a questionnaire should always be read with caution. It is important to remember, in particular, that these comments represent just over half of those responding.

That said, close examination and coding of these responses reveal several themes.

1. The scoring of the SWA is unhelpful and inconsistent. (23 comments)

The strongest theme in these comments centers on a set of concerns about the scoring of the SWA. Specifically, a number of respondents registered their displeasure with the state's use of holistic, rather than analytic, scoring. This comment is typical: "The results would be more educational to students if you provide analytical scores back to each student." (For more on this issue, see our year one report.)

However, the bulk of concerns about scoring focused not on approach, but on reliability:

> I question the consistency of scoring at the 3 sites—do they grade more easily in Omaha or Kearney or Scottsbluff?
>
> [T]he bias of individuals at the ratings sites can still come through in spite of the "checks and balances" employed. My observation: "Voice" tends to be overrated on the positive side; "Conventions" tends to be overrated on the negative side. I appreciate Nebraska's efforts to maintain local control of the process, but we are FAR from having a truly uniform, reliable system for assessing student writing statewide.

We note that NDE is using only one scoring site for the 2004 SWA; this should alleviate concerns about differential scoring at multiple sites.

***2. The SWA creates an inauthentic writing environment.* (19 comments)**

Many teachers expressed the concern that the SWA does not honor the writing process, and is not in line with what writers do in the "real world." They claimed that the exam does not allow what writers most need: time for reflection, feedback from others, reading aloud, opportunities to write in multiple forms and contexts, and so on. Instead, one teacher adamantly suggested,

> the state forces them into a cold, sterile, vacuum. They are forced to write on a topic usually so asinine that most students feel that it is worthless on which to write. They are given a time period in which to complete the work, when real writing is not forced into a time limit. I strongly feel no child does his/her best work in this testing environment writing on a topic in which they feel no fervor.

Other teachers placed emphasis on the need to work through the writing *process*, including revision, for which respondents claimed there is little time under SWA strictures. They claimed that the SWA simply does not capture what a student can do, and sends messages to students about writing that contradict what process-minded teachers are doing in their classrooms. In the language of these respondents, the objection here is that the SWA is "inauthentic."

***3. The SWA (and in particular six-trait writing) is a positive feature of STARS – or is at least less onerous than other components of that system.* (19 comments)**

Several comments offered a strong endorsement of the SWA, and especially sit-trait writing. One teacher wrote, "I am absolutely, positively sold on sit traits & writing assessments." Another explained:

> Our school has really become involved with the Statewide Writing Assessment this year. Our 6th & 7th graders are being made "more" aware of what this assessment is and what it means. They even made posters and locker signs wishing our 8th graders luck & reminding them to use their 6 traits. It was very cool!!

On the other hand, the preponderance of comments in this category are comparative and typically lukewarm, like this one: "in comparison to the way we, as the state of Nebraska, are handling our 'standards,' the writing assessment is about 100 steps above that. Here with the writing assessment we are at lest 'comparing apples to apples' by neutral judges."

4. The mode (description) and form (essay) of writing solicited by the SWA is inappropriate or too limited for 8th grade students. *(17 comments)*

Many respondents expressed displeasure at the SWA's emphasis on the descriptive mode. They find description to be more difficult but less useful than other types of writing – namely, narrative and exposition. One respondent wrote, "Expository writing is more valuable for cross-curricular writing & what parents & community value." Similarly, another claimed that "[e]xpository and narrative have far more uses as future high school and college students. Desc[riptive] writing is not used nearly as often!"

In addition, some respondents questioned whether "description" is a viable mode at all, and claimed that students (and, in some cases, teachers) were confused by the injunction to write "a

description": "I think descriptive prompts are difficult for students. Students tend to want to include them in a story or as part of informative writing. It seems a difficult task for 8th grade to isolate a description from a story for any length." The message from these respondents seems to be, in the words of one of them, that '[s]tudents should be taught to use good description in the other three types – i.e., narrative, expository, and persuasive."

Finally, several respondents also registered displeasure with what they perceive to be the limited *form* of writing solicited by the SWA. One wrote, "[t]here is still too much emphasis on the five paragraph essay." Likewise, another respondent claimed that

> districts are making the teachers create students who are masters of the five-paragraph essay. While these essays have their place, time to teach creative writing is shrinking. Creative writing is slowly losing out. We are going to have a generation of students who can write in a format and truly say nothing.

***5. SWA results are reported belatedly and inappropriately.* (16 comments)**

Comments in this category follow two lines. First, some respondents believe the reporting *schedule* is problematic, particularly because it does not allow teachers and students to use the data for instructional purposes: "The time frame is absurd! Approximately 2 weeks were given to administer the assessment, but if and when the results come back the students have gone on to another teacher or school. How can that possibly be translated into a learning experience?"

Far more responses in this category, however, bemoan harmful district comparisons using SWA. Again, some of these comments are strident:

> [R]esults should <u>never</u> be published. This merely attempts to show that one teacher is better than another. In reality, it shows nothing! The only thing we, as educators, need to do with the results is compare them to prior writing from the same student to demonstrate progress. In no way, shape, or form should we compare one student to another, one school to another, one district to another since each has a unique compilation of socio-economics, family structure, resources, population etc. Publishing results frustrates teachers, yet does <u>nothing</u> to increase the scores in following years.
>
> Putting one school district against other school districts is unhealthy and not constructive when developing writing skills. That is what this process boils down to. It is more for "political consumption" than for the improvement of the quality of education."

***6. The prompt was problematic.* (14 comments)**

When respondents registered displeasure with the prompt, they generally did so in general terms, offering comments such as "The writing prompts are sometimes poor" or "The writing prompts are terrible." A few claimed the prompt this year was vague, while others reported their students found it uninteresting. One respondent suggested his/her students found the prompt "too elementary." A typical comment in this category is this one: "The state writing prompts do not seem applicable in our area. It should be a choice of what to write about—not just one prompt." Indeed, several respondents proposed offering more than one prompt.

***7. Students are not motivated to do well on the SWA.* (11 comments)**

Several respondents noted that students simply "don't care" about the SWA, that the exam isn't important to students because there are no stakes involved for them. They also suggested that this skews results, offering a misleadingly negative portrait of students' abilities:

> The students place little to no importance on the assessment. There are no incentives for them to do well.

> The major obstacle to accurate results is student apathy towards tests & non-parental support for at-risk students.

A couple respondents claimed that the SWA – and assessment in general – dampens students' enthusiasm for writing and learning: "Students don't care about education as they once did. It isn't theirs anymore; it belongs to the state."

Overall Analysis of Narrative Comments:

The narrative comments on balance are more negative than the numerical results of the survey would suggest. Perhaps this is because those with complaints are more likely to be vocal. In any event, again we suggest caution in interpreting and assigning value to these narrative comments. While they may be useful in uncovering sentiments we may not have accounted for in the numerical portion of the survey, they come from only 56% of the returned surveys.

Still, some of the themes above support our prediction in last year's report that as Nebraska teachers' expertise in writing grows, they will become restless about the limitations of the SWA. Comments in categories 1, 3, 5, and 6 are similar to those offered by fourth-grade writing teachers in our year one report; like their eighth-grade counterparts, they have concerns about the prompt, scoring, and reporting of the SWA, but generally view it as less onerous than other components of STARS. The other themes, however, are new:

- #3 suggests that writing teachers view the exam as antithetical to their approach to teaching writing as a process
- #4 suggests that the kind of writing sponsored by the SWA is not in line with what writing teachers want students to be writing
- #7 suggests students are not invested in the writing they do for the SWA

These are precisely the kinds of concerns – centering on abiding professional commitments – that could seriously erode the kind of support the SWA has enjoyed to date. We refer readers to our year one report, which includes the long-term recommendation to "move toward a more complex, rigorous, and authentic writing assessment" (46).

Ultimately, however, we see no evidence to contradict the finding in last year's report that the SWA, and six-trait writing in particular, has had a salutary effect on Nebraska classrooms.

Appendix G
Analyses of Mathematics Survey

In this Appendix, we analyze the results of the mathematics survey (see Appendix D for our methodology and Appendix E for a copy of the survey). We begin by identifying major findings. We then present tables including each survey item. We end with an analysis of the narrative comments on the mathematics survey.

Major Findings

Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Practices
We asked teachers to indicate whether their district's mathematics assessments have caused them to place more emphasis, the same emphasis, or less emphasis on a range of classroom practices. [Table 1]

In general, *the mathematics assessments have had little effect on emphases in mathematics instruction.* In most cases, the majority of responses fall under "same emphasis."

The most pronounced exception, perhaps not surprisingly, is "exercises that support items similar to district math assessments," where 50% of the teachers indicated more emphasis. In addition, 30% reported more emphasis on problem solving skills, and 34% reported more emphasis on data analysis, probability, and statistics. The only item on which we find significantly *less* emphasis is "group/collaborative projects."

Mathematics Assessments Used in Classrooms
We asked teachers to indicate which types of assessments they use in their classrooms to measure student learning on standards: CRAs, NRAs, and classroom-based assessments. [Table 2]

Teachers reported that *all three types of assessment are in heavy use in their classrooms*. Only NRAs received a large percentage of responses in the "rarely" and "never" categories (45%).

Mathematics Assessments and Assessment Literacy
We asked teachers whether the math assessments have helped them learn about assessment. [Table 3]

Teachers believe that the mathematics assessments have helped them learn more about assessment. 66% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while only 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Teachers' Perceptions of Their Professional Development
We asked teachers a series of questions regarding their confidence in their own abilities and their professional development. [Table 4]

In general, *teachers are confident in their abilities vis-à-vis math assessment, believe they have had adequate opportunities to learn about mathematics standards and assessment, and feel they are strongly supported in their professional development by their administration.*

Specifically:

- 98% are confident in their ability as a math teacher (agreed or strongly agreed)
- 78% are confident in their ability to design math assessments
- 94% are confident in their ability to administer math assessments
- 87% are confident in their ability to score math assessments
- 76% are confident in their ability to interpret math assessments
- 79% are confident in their ability to use math assessments
- 75% believe they have had adequate opportunities to learn about math standards and assessment
- 81% believe that their administration strongly supports their professional development

On average, teachers reported having attended 2.5 professional development activities involving mathematics standards and assessment in the last year.

Teachers' Involvement in Math Assessment Process
We asked teachers whether they were involved in various phases of the math assessment process. [Table 5]

Close to 2/3 of teachers participated in developing district math assessments, aligning math curriculum with state/local standards, and helping implement changes based on assessment results. 58% were involved in scoring district assessments. Less than 30% were involved in putting together the district assessment portfolio.

Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Experiences of Mathematics Assessments
We asked teachers three questions about their perceptions of students' experiences with mathematics assessments. [Table 6]

It is important to remember, when reading the results of this section of the survey, that we are measuring *teachers' perceptions* of students' experiences, not the experiences themselves, or students' perceptions of them.

Thus, we can say that in general, *teachers believe students do their best work on mathematics assessments, and are motivated to do well, but experience anxiety about the assessments.*

Less than 8% of teachers reported that few or none of their students do their best work on the math assessments. Similarly, only 11% reported that few or none of their students are motivated to do well.

Meanwhile, 70% of teachers reported that at least some of their students experience anxiety about taking the mathematics assessments.

Teachers' Perceptions of Mathematics Assessments
We asked teachers a range of questions about their perceptions of mathematics assessments. [Table 7]

In general, *teachers have positive perceptions of the mathematics assessments despite low confidence in the fairness of the state's rating procedure and a belief that the assessments have not improved students' math skills.*

Mathematics assessments received high ratings on a number of items, including the following:

- 63% agreed or strongly agreed that the math assessments accurately assess what they teach
- 83% agreed or strongly agreed that the math assessment results are useful for teachers
- 74% agreed or strongly agreed that the math assessment support learning objectives they have for their students

Readers may note the low ratings on questions regarding ELL and SPED guidelines. For instance, only 30% agreed or strongly agreed that accommodation/inclusion guidelines for ELL are clear, and only 23% agreed or strongly agreed that they are fair. However, it is important to consider the frequency of responses on the "Don't Know" and "NA" categories for these items. That is, the number of teachers marking "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" may be low because a significant number of teachers simply does not work with ELL (or SPED) students. While this may be an area to watch, these findings are inconclusive at best.

However, two findings may warrant more immediate attention. Specifically:

- Only 32% agreed or strongly agreed that the state's rating system is fair
- Only 26% agreed or strongly agreed that math skills have improved due to math assessments

Both items show a decided split in teachers' perceptions; 24% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the first statement, and 35% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the second statement.

Teachers' Perceptions of Communication Between Teachers and Other Groups
We asked teachers a series of questions about how mathematics assessments affect communication between teachers and other groups. [Table 8]

In general, *communication between teachers and other groups has not been affected drastically by mathematics assessments.* The only minor exception is between teachers and other teachers, where 58% reported somewhat better or much better communication.

Coda: An Interesting Finding That May Warrant Further Study
We conducted statistical analyses (chi-square tests, Pearson correlations, ANOVAs, Welch's tests, and t-tests) to break responses down on selected items by region, district class, years of teaching experience, number of professional development activities, and highest degree earned. (Note that most analyses were conducted without the NA and Don't Know options because most of the analyses with these options in did not match those without them in. This is because very few respondents used these response options and often cell sizes were so small that the minimum expected cell count was not achieved.) Few statistically significant findings emerged (at the .05 level). Among these, the following may warrant further investigation:

- Teachers from district classes 2-3 were likely to have participated in developing the district's mathematics assessments and aligning curriculum with standards, while those from classes 4 and 5 were less likely to have done so. [Tables 9 and 10]

Table 1: Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Practices

Item*	More Emphasis	Same Emphasis	Less Emphasis	Don't Know	NA
1 problem solving skills	175	349	49	3	
	30.38	*60.59*	*8.51*	*0.52*	
2 communication of mathematical concepts	167	371	26	7	
	29.25	*64.97*	*4.55*	*1.23*	
3 mathematical reasoning skills	156	381	34	3	1
	27.13	*66.26*	*5.91*	*0.52*	*0.17*
4 basic math skills	162	372	38	2	
	28.22	*64.81*	*6.62*	*0.35*	
5 higher-order math skills	167	335	62	7	4
	29.04	*58.26*	*10.78*	*1.22*	*0.70*
6 numeration/number sense	123	430	17	6	
	21.35	*74.65*	*2.95*	*1.04*	
7 computation/estimation	131	413	26	6	
	22.74	*71.70*	*4.51*	*1.04*	
8 measurement	145	377	45	3	5
	25.22	*65.57*	*7.83*	*0.52*	*0.87*
9 geometry/spatial concepts	140	386	32	6	10
	24.39	*67.25*	*5.57*	*1.05*	*1.74*
10 data analysis, probability, and statistics	195	296	46	7	29
	34.03	*51.66*	*8.03*	*1.22*	*5.06*
11 algebraic concepts	159	350	31	7	26
	27.75	*61.08*	*5.41*	*1.22*	*4.54*
12 direct instruction to whole class	93	443	31		4
	16.15	*76.91*	*5.38*	*0.87*	*0.69*
13 integration of content/skills from different subjects	80	344	127	16	8
	13.91	*59.83*	*22.09*	*2.78*	*1.39*
14 application of concepts in real-life situations	125	373	71	6	1
	21.70	*64.76*	*12.33*	*1.04*	*0.17*
15 exercises that support items similar to the math assessments	285	263	10	13	3
	49.65	*45.82*	*1.74*	*2.26*	*0.52*
16 group/collaborative projects	39	325	189	7	15
	6.78	*56.52*	*32.87*	*1.22*	*2.61*
17 in-class bookwork/ worksheets	84	434	49	4	3
	14.63	*75.61*	*8.54*	*0.70*	*0.52*
18 practice tests/pretests	146	369	45	4	12
	25.35	*64.06*	*7.81*	*0.69*	*2.08*
19 inquiry-based teaching	75	373	95	22	10
	13.04	*64.87*	*16.52*	*3.83*	*1.74*
20 activity-based teaching	91	359	106	18	1
	15.83	*62.43*	*18.43*	*3.13*	*0.17*

* First value is frequency of responses. Values italicized are percent of responses.

Table 2: Mathematics Assessments Used In Classrooms

Item*	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Don't Know	NA
21a. In my classroom, I use criterion-referenced assessments to measure student learning on standards	253 *45.42*	180 *32.32*	79 *14.18*	19 *3.41*	16 *2.87*	10 *1.80*
21b. I use norm-referenced assessments to measure student learning on standards	52 *9.35*	219 *39.39*	165 *29.68*	84 *15.11*	21 *3.78*	15 *2.70*
21c. I use classroom-based assessments to measure student learning on standards	375 *66.73*	121 *21.53*	32 *5.69*	22 *3.91*	12 *2.14*	

* First value is frequency of responses. Values italicized are percent of responses.

Table 3: Teachers' Perceptions of Their Assessment Literacy

Item*	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know	NA
22 My district's math assessments have helped me learn more about assessment	106 *18.60*	267 *46.84*	105 *18.42*	61 *10.70*	25 *4.39*	5 *0.88*	1 *0.18*

* First value is frequency of responses. Values italicized are percent of responses.

Table 4: Teachers' Perceptions of the their Professional Development

Item*	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know	NA
22 My district's math assessments have helped me learn more about assessment	106 *18.60*	267 *46.84*	105 *18.42*	61 *10.70*	25 *4.39*	5 *0.88*	1 *0.18*
23a I am confident in my ability as a math teacher	382 *66.43*	184 *32.00*	5 *0.87*	4 *0.70*			
23b I am confident in my ability to design math assessments	177 *30.89*	270 *47.12*	83 *14.49*	34 *5.93*	8 *1.40*	1 *0.17*	
23c I am confident in my ability to administer math assessments	309 *53.83*	230 *40.07*	28 *4.88*	6 *1.05*			1 *0.17*
23d I am confident in my ability to score/evaluate math assessments	254 *44.25*	249 *43.38*	51 *8.89*	17 *2.96*	2 *0.35*		1 *0.17*
23e I am confident in my ability to interpret math assessments	186 *32.40*	251 *43.73*	98 *17.07*	34 *5.92*	5 *0.87*		
23f I am confident in my ability to use math assessments	182 *31.71*	269 *46.86*	89 *15.51*	25 *4.36*	6 *1.05*	2 *0.35*	1 *0.17*
24 I have had adequate opportunities to learn about math assessments	154 *26.78*	276 *48.00*	56 *9.74*	75 *13.04*	13 *2.26*		1 *0.17*
25 My administration strongly supports my professional development	240 *41.88*	226 *39.44*	73 *12.74*	26 *4.54*	5 *0.87*	3 *0.52*	

* First value is frequency of responses. Values italicized are percent of responses.

Table 5: Teacher Involvement in Math Assessment Process

	f	%
26a. Involved in developing district math assessments	352	*61.22*
26b. Involved in aligning district math curriculum with state/local standards	360	*62.61*
26c. Involved in scoring district assessments	333	*57.91*
26d. Involved in putting together a district assessment portfolio	164	*28.52*
26e. Involved in helping implement changes based on assessment results	370	*64.35*

Table 6: Teachers' Perceptions of Student Experiences with Mathematics Assessments

Item*	All	Most	Some	Few	None	Don't Know	NA
27 My students do their best work on the math assessments	21	317	183	40	3	8	3
	3.65	*55.13*	*31.83*	*6.96*	*0.52*	*1.39*	*0.52*
28 My students are motivated to do well on math assessments	33	303	173	56	3	4	2
	5.75	*52.79*	*30.14*	*9.76*	*0.52*	*0.70*	*0.35*
29 My students experience anxiety about taking the mathematics assessment	13	105	289	141	18	6	3
	2.26	*18.26*	*50.26*	*24.52*	*3.13*	*1.04*	*0.52*

* First value is frequency of responses. Values italicized are percent of responses.

Table 7: Teachers' Perceptions of District's Mathematics Assessments

Item*	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know	NA
30 The math assessments accurately assess what I teach	65 *11.44*	295 *51.94*	108 *19.01*	75 *13.20*	20 *3.52*	3 *0.53*	2 *0.35*
31 I modify my instruction in areas on which students did not perform well	129 *22.51*	363 *63.35*	54 *9.42*	18 *3.14*	3 *0.52*	2 *0.35*	4 *0.70*
32 The district's scoring procedure is fair	73 *12.67*	321 *55.73*	110 *19.10*	40 *6.94*	9 *1.56*	21 *3.65*	2 *0.35*
33 The state's rating procedure is fair	25 *4.41*	157 *27.69*	151 *26.63*	85 *14.99*	48 *8.47*	96 *16.93*	5 *0.88*
34a. The math assessment results are useful for schools	100 *17.39*	355 *61.74*	73 *12.70*	26 *4.52*	16 *2.78*	5 *0.87*	
34b. The math assessment results are useful for students	71 *12.37*	299 *52.09*	102 *17.77*	65 *11.32*	26 *4.53*	10 *1.74*	1 *0.17*
34c. The math assessment results are useful for community/parents	51 *8.93*	272 *47.64*	140 *24.52*	64 *11.21*	30 *5.25*	14 *2.45*	
34d. The math assessment results are useful for teachers	126 *21.95*	351 *61.15*	52 *9.06*	25 *4.36*	16 *2.79*	4 *0.70*	
34e. The math assessment results are useful for the district	91 *15.85*	341 *59.41*	83 *14.46*	36 *6.27*	19 *3.31*	4 *0.70*	
34f. The math assessment results are useful for the state	73 *12.78*	266 *46.58*	123 *21.54*	56 *9.81*	37 *6.48*	15 *2.63*	1 *0.18*
35a. The accommodation/inclusion guidelines for SPED students are clear to me	47 *8.23*	210 *36.78*	115 *20.14*	90 *15.76*	41 *7.18*	52 *9.11*	16 *2.80*
35b. The accommodation/inclusion guidelines for SPED students are fair	34 *6.01*	163 *28.80*	164 *28.98*	 *13.25*	29 *5.12*	84 *14.84*	17 3.00
36a. The accommodation/inclusion guidelines for ELL students are clear to me	32 *5.60*	136 *23.82*	102 *17.86*	74 *12.96*	32 *5.60*	96 *16.81*	99 *17.34*
36b. The accommodation/inclusion guidelines for ELL students are fair	20 *3.53*	108 *19.05*	140 *24.69*	47 *8.29*	32 *5.64*	119 20.99	101 *17.81*
37 Math assessments support learning objectives I have for my students	86 *14.98*	341 *59.41*	81 *14.11*	44 *7.67*	15 *2.61*	5 *0.87*	2 *0.35*
38 Student math skills have improved due to math assessments	*32.00* *5.55*	*113.00* *19.58*	*189.00* *32.76*	*162.00* *28.08*	*43.00* *7.45*	*36.00* *6.24*	2 *0.35*
39 I spend more time teaching math than I did before the math assessments	30 *5.20*	70 *12.13*	113 *19.58*	217 *37.61*	129 *22.36*	6 *1.04*	12 *2.08*

* First value is frequency of responses. Values italicized are percent of responses.

Table 8: Teachers' Perceptions of Communication Between Teachers and Other Groups

Item*	Much Better	Somewhat Better	Same	Somewhat Worse	Much Worse	Don't Know	NA
40a Administrators	30	168	327	25	8	12	5
	5.22	*29.22*	*56.87*	*4.35*	*1.39*	*2.09*	*0.87*
40b Students	34	191	326	12		12	1
	5.90	*33.16*	*56.60*	*2.08*		*2.08*	*0.17*
40c Parents	24	136	374	18		24	
	4.17	*23.61*	*64.93*	*3.13*		*4.17*	
40d Local community	14	91	352	41	4	67	6
	2.43	*15.83*	*61.22*	*7.13*	*0.70*	*11.65*	*1.04*
40e Other teachers	82	252	206	13	5	15	2
	14.26	*43.83*	*35.83*	*2.26*	*0.87*	*2.61*	*0.35*
40f Educational Service Units	41	170	204	12	2	126	21
	7.12	*29.51*	*35.42*	*2.08*	*0.35*	*21.88*	*3.65*
40g Nebraska Department of Education	22	137	228	29	10	137	13
	3.82	*23.78*	*39.58*	*5.03*	*1.74*	*23.78*	*2.26*
40h Higher education institutions	10	68	286	10	3	173	24
	1.74	*11.85*	*49.83*	*1.74*	*0.52*	*30.14*	*4.18*

* First value is frequency of responses. Values italicized are percent of responses.

Table 9:

District Class			i26a-Involved in developing district math assessments: YES	NO	TOTAL
	1	Count	11	9	20
		% within district class	55	45	100
		% of Total	2.04	1.67	3.71
	2	Count	14	1	15
		% within district class	93.33	6.67	100
		% of Total	2.59	0.19	2.79
	3	Count	264	112	376
		% within district class	70.21	29.79	100
		% of Total	48.89	20.74	69.63
	4	Count	13	43	56
		% within district class	23.21	76.79	100
		% of Total	2.41	7.96	10.38
	5	Count	18	45	63
		% within district class	28.57	71.43	100
		% of Total	3.33	8.33	11.68
	6	Count	10	0	10
		% within district class	100	0	100
		% of Total	1.85	0	1.85
		Count	330	210	540
Total		% within district class	61.11	38.89	100
		% of Total	61.11	38.89	100

Table 10		**i26b- involved in aligning district's math curriculum with standards**		
District Class		YES	NO	TOTAL
1	Count	14	6	20
	% within district class	70	30	100
	% of Total	2.59	1.11	3.70
2	Count	15	0	15
	% within district class	100	0	100
	% of Total	2.78	0	2.78
3	Count	275	101	376
	% within district class	73.14	26.86	100
	% of Total	50.93	18.70	69.63
4	Count	11	45	56
	% within district class	19.64	80.36	100
	% of Total	2.04	8.33	10.37
5	Count	17	46	63
	% within district class	26.98	73.02	100
	% of Total	3.15	8.52	11.67
6	Count	9	1	10
	% within district class	90	10	100
	% of Total	1.67	0.19	1.85
Total	Count	341	199	540
	% within district class	63.15	36.85	100
	% of Total	63.15	36.85	100

Analysis of Narrative Comments on Mathematics Questionnaires

At the end of the Mathematics Questionnaire, we asked respondents the question "Is there anything else you would like to tell us about mathematics assessment?" Two hundred and seventy-three respondents (46% of the total) used the short space provided to offer a comment.

Results based solely on unprompted narrative comments at the end of a questionnaire should always be read cautiously. It is important to remember, in particular, that these comments represent less than half of those responding.

That said, close examination and coding of these responses reveal several themes.

1. Assessments are too time consuming, and take time away from instruction. (69 responses)

In keeping with last year's study most common topic in these responses is time. Sixty-nine respondents reported that assessments are too time-consuming or "waste time." This tally is, if anything, conservative, as we include only those comments that claimed assessments are a time *problem*, not just a challenge. (So, for instance, we included comments suggesting assessments take "too much time," but not those suggesting that assessments are "time-consuming" or a "challenge.")

Fifty-three respondents specifically claimed that assessment takes too much time away from instruction. This comment is typical: "I believe teachers should be devoting our time to instruction and let the statisticians take care of the state assessment data."

Other respondents – though far fewer in number – indicated that assessments cut into their personal time. One teacher described the situation this way: "Every evening & weekend belongs to the school. There is time for very little else. Young teachers will have a difficult time to maintain families & work unless something is given up."

***2. Standards and assessment narrow the curriculum and require teachers to "teach to the test."* (29 responses)**

Many teachers wrote that standards and assessment are "driving" the curriculum, often with harmful results. They described what they perceive to be a narrowing or "dumbing down" of the mathematics curriculum in their district:

> Our curriculum was more advanced than the standards—we would have to scale back to keep up. The 4th-grade class is now 20 lessons behind usual development because of all the time needed for standards assessment.
>
> There are now "holes" in the curriculum as teachers are "teaching to the test." We no longer teach a spiral curriculum that builds. The CRTs do not focus on an integrated math curriculum. We are forced to pick & choose lessons leaving out concepts that are important to later development.

A large number of respondents (approximately 15) specifically used the phrase "teaching to the test." This is especially true among respondents who work in districts with ESU- or district-designed criterion-referenced tests.

***3. Local mathematics assessments are inadequate.* (26 responses)**

Many teachers claimed that mathematics assessments used in their district are somehow inadequate: i.e., unreliable, biased, ill-timed, too difficult or too easy, or error-ridden. This perception seems more common among teachers in districts using ESU- or district-designed CRTs. One respondent claimed that the "STARS test developed by ESU -- contains many errors. Graphs that are not labeled, correct answers are not on the test. This test could not possibly be valid" (emphasis in original). Other respondents claimed the mathematics assessments are biased. Some respondents wrote that their assessments are not "in depth or rigorous," while others indicated that "they are too difficult."

4. Nebraska needs a consistent accountability program, including a state test. (23 responses)

Many respondents registered concerns regarding what they perceive as a lack of consistency in STARS, and some of these argued explicitly for a state test. This recommendation is generally tied to concerns expressed in other themes: the problem of time, the lack of comparability, inadequate local assessments. One respondent framed his/her recommendation as an opportunity-to-learn issue: "In math Nebraska needs to develop a state wide test. Each district could then align their curriculum to the test. In many instances students are tested on areas in which they have had no instruction." Another framed his/her proposal as the time issue, and wrote, "Let the teachers teach!! Let the state assess!!" But for the most part, respondents pointed to *consistency* as the

overarching issue. This comment captures the general tenor of remarks in this category: "I think the same math assessments should be given throughout the state. They should be short, single objective, and state scored."

5. *Nebraska should maintain its commitment to flexibility and local discretion.* (22 responses)

For (almost) every respondent who offered a plea for more consistency, a respondent applauded the flexibility of STARS or would like to see it enhanced. Several respondents stated that in education, "one size does not fit all." As one put it, "*All children can learn but they learn at different rates.* You cannot mandate that all children will be on [the same] level" (emphasis in original). Another teacher was particularly effusive: "Local control of assessment is awesome! I feel fortunate to teach in Nebraska."

Not every teacher experiences their standards, assessment, and accountability process as flexible, however. One teacher wrote, "There is no room [anymore] for exploration, projects, inquiry learning, group projects, interdisciplinary projects, etc." (emphasis in original). Another worries about losing flexibility via an ESU-designed test: "This will improve record keeping and portfolio criteria, which is better for the administration and Dept. of Education. However, my concern will be (until I've gone through the assessments) how will their assessments align with our curriculum?"

6. *Districts and schools are victimized by inappropriate comparisons.* (17 responses)

Respondents expressed anxiety about what they consider to be inappropriate comparisons between districts. Several invoked the obvious simile: "Comparing any two school districts is like comparing apples and oranges." Some specifically pointed to the media as the culprit, but others indicated that NDE or schools themselves are comparing schools, even though there is "very little (if any at all) validity to any comparison being made from school district to district." This concern is tied to #4; some respondents (but certainly not all) who complained about unfair comparisons support a statewide test. (One teacher wrote that "[w]e have been told over and over not to compare schools, but let's face it, everyone does!")

***7. The emphasis on assessment/testing is not helping students to learn*. (15 responses)**

A number of respondents expressed the perception that the focus on assessment in their district and in the state is geared less toward helping students to learn than toward satisfying politicians' desires. Comments in this category tend to be particularly pointed. One teacher wrote that "we [seem] to have forgotten the children and the joy there can be in the learning process. It is a sad state of affairs." Another agreed, adding:

> I am no longer a teacher, I am a test preparer. I don't teach the mathematics of life. I now teach the mathematics of whatever test is important at the time to whichever [politician] is in office!!

A few exceptions emerge, such as this one: "I feel that assessments assist in helping students make a stronger connection with the meaning and purposes of concepts learned" (see also #9, below). But on the whole, respondents seem skeptical of the purposes and wary of the effects of mathematics assessments on student learning.

8. ***The standards, assessment, and accountability process keeps changing, causing considerable confusion.*** **(14 responses)**

Respondents reported confusion and frustration with the changes in the assessment process – locally and at the state and federal levels. One teacher who is active in assessment locally, for instance, wrote: "It seems that when we do assessment work at the ESU or at school, no one seems to know what exactly is to be done. There are no guidelines…How can we know if we have a good, reliable assessment when right away, we are told to change it?" Another stated that he/she is "sick and tired of rewriting my tests every time someone at the state level changes the rules." Still another noted the particular onus such changes place on those who work with assessment in small schools: "I am the only high school math teacher and it is too much work for one person. Nobody obviously took in mind small schools when they came up with the STARS idea."

9. ***Standards and assessment help focus and align curriculum and instruction.*** **(13 responses)**

Finally, a number of respondents lauded the standards and assessment process for prompting and guiding their staff in the alignment and focusing of their curriculum and instruction. One teacher wrote, simply, "[assessments] are valuable in guiding instruction." Another elaborated: "[The assessment process] has helped our school district be fair to all students, because we know what is to be taught in each course and we all give the same quarter assessments. It has helped us work together." According to respondent such as this, standards and assessments are a centripetal force: they pull together – and in the process clarify – instruction and curriculum.

Overall Analysis

Like the narrative comments on the SWA survey, these comments paint a more negative picture of teachers' views of mathematics assessments than do the numerical results of the survey. Again, this may be because those with complaints are more likely to vocalize their ideas in a space such as this. Moreover, we must remember that those who offered any narrative comment at all are in the minority.

That said, the following perceptions may be cause for special concern:

- ✓ *Assessment is separate from instruction, rather than integrated into it*. In fact, comments under # 1 suggest that teachers perceive assessment to be *competing* with instruction for classroom time. Under #2, we see that assessment *drives* instruction and curriculum, but is not part of them.

- ✓ *The mathematics assessments in many districts are sub-par*. This was the 3rd strongest theme in the comments; there is no doubt many teachers are dissatisfied with the assessments they are administering, especially in districts where the assessments are designed at the district or ESU level.

Ultimately, perceptions about STARS are mixed, as themes 4 and 5 clearly show. When we compare comments such as these with our data from last year, we believe we are witnessing some polarization of positions. While we detected a "wait and see" attitude last year, we are seeing more passionate defenses and critiques of STARS this year.

Appendix H
Sufficiency Study Proposal

HARD COPY AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST

Appendix I
Year One Report
Executive Summary

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APPENDIX J

Supplement to Year One Report

Evaluation of District Language Arts Assessments

Deborah Bandalos, PhD

Research Design

We conducted 14 focus group interviews during February through April of 2002. Interviewees included 68 teachers and administrators from 11 districts representing nine Educational Service Units across the state. Schools were selected through a stratified random sampling plan, with stratification on ESU, school size, and assessment rating to obtain a sample of schools that was representative in terms of size, geographical location and quality of the assessment plan. Total numbers of students in the districts ranged from fewer than 50 students to over 7000.

District 1 is a small district in the eastern part of the state with fewer than 200 students. One interview: four teachers.

District 2 is a small district in the far western part of the state with fewer than 200 students. One interview: 8 teachers.

District 3 is a small district in the south-central part of the state with fewer than 100 students. One telephone interview: 3 teachers.

District 4 is a large district in the extreme southeastern part of the state with over 4000 students. One interview: 9 teachers.

District 5 is a small district in the extreme southeastern part of the state with fewer than 400 students. One interview: 6 teachers.

District 6 is a large district in the central part of the state with over 7000 students. Two interviews: 6 teachers and 2 administrators.

District 7 is a medium-sized district in the south central part of the state with over 800 students. One interview: 3 teachers and 1 administrator.

District 8 is a medium-sized district in the eastern part of the state with over 700 students. One interview: 4 teachers.

District 9 is a large district in the western part of the state with over 4000 students. Three interviews: 20 teachers and 1 administrator.

District 10 is a small district in the northwestern part of the state with fewer than 150 students. One interview: 3 teachers.

District 11 is a small district in the northwestern part of the state with fewer than 60 students. One interview: 1 teacher.

The interview questions are included at the end of this report. Participants were informed of their rights as research subjects according to the guidelines provided by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Nebraska.

All but one interview session were conducted in a focus group format. One interview was done with only one teacher. All interviews were conducted in person except one, which was conducted by telephone for logistic reasons. In all of the in-person interviews, one researcher asked questions while a second researcher took notes. All interviews were also tape recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants. Interview transcripts were analyzed several times for commonalities as well as anomalous findings, resulting in this final report. Each section of the report summarizes answers to one of the interview questions.

Findings

Process of Creating the Assessments

Schools varied a great deal in terms of how long they had been working on STARS. One school referred to the process as "our lifelong commitment" and had spent the past three summers and school years on it. Overall, it appears, not surprisingly, as though schools that began the process earlier were more satisfied with their processes and obtained higher QC ratings. This is consistent with the comments made by educators in virtually every school that the process was extremely time-consuming. The most frequent criticism of the STARS process was that it did not allow enough time for teachers to do an adequate job.

Another factor that seemed to contribute to success in the sense of both teacher satisfaction (or at least lack of serious complaints) and higher ratings was participation in a consortium. The advantages of participation in a consortium are numerous: teachers commented most on the benefits of having others to brainstorm with, being able to spread the work around so that no one person was responsible for too much, and the fact that consortiums were more likely to be able to hire consultants or obtain other types of outside expertise. One teacher summed up the feelings about the benefits of working in a group by saying "I think I would have sat in the corner and cried" if she had had to work by herself.

Working with a group from outside one's district was not a completely positive experience, however. Teachers from two different districts commented that working with their group was challenging because they lacked a shared understanding. For these teachers, working with others from their own school went much more quickly because they shared the same values regarding education in their district.

A final factor that was mentioned as having a positive influence on the process was the support and involvement of administrators. At least three of the schools in which we interviewed commented on the difficulties introduced due to lack of understanding and leadership from their administration. These schools attributed the fact that they were "floundering" and behind in their assessment process to this lack of leadership.

Overall, the processes followed by the schools involved three steps: Unpacking the standards, aligning their curriculum, both to the standards and across grade levels, and writing assessments targeted to the standards. This sequence, while not followed by all schools, seems to have been important in obtaining a good outcome. As a teacher from one school that did not go through the alignment process first put it, "I would really like to have seen the curriculum more in place and use that as a guide" because then the process would have been "no problem." Not having aligned the curriculum first resulted in teachers feeling as though they were always "backdooring it."

How the Process Went

Teachers at virtually every school stressed how confused and frustrated they were at the beginning of the process. These comments ranged from fairly mild ("We were lost for about three weeks"; "It was like the blind leading the blind for awhile") to extreme ("We looked at it frankly like a nightmare"; "Everyone was pulling their hair out by the end"). By the end of the first year of the STARS process, however, most teachers seemed to feel that they were "really headed in the right direction," as one teacher put it. Not all teachers or all districts felt this way, however. In one district in particular, teachers stated that they had received no positive feedback about STARS from any teacher.

While this was probably the most negative comment we heard, every district expressed some negativity. Chief among these were perceptions from every district that the rules handed down from the state kept changing. As one teacher told us, this was their "biggest frustration." Teachers in many of the districts studied expressed a desire for more guidance on subjects such as writing different types of assessments, the quality criteria, and the overall STARS process. Teachers in several districts commented that they were unable to visualize the "end result" of their STARS process until it was nearly finished. These teachers stated that having more examples up front would have been useful to them in creating their assessment plan.

Another frequent area of complaint was the time involved in both the development and implementation of STARS. Virtually all of the districts studied stated that teachers spent many hours working on STARS and were overwhelmed by the amount of time it took. Teachers in several of the districts also complained that the amount of time spent teaching the curriculum dictated by the state educational standards, giving the STARS assessments, and providing feedback to students on the results took what they considered to be an inordinate amount of classroom time. These teachers were angry that they had to sacrifice class content they considered to be important in order to make time for STARS activities.

A final concern expressed by teachers in the larger districts pertained to the lack of involvement of the majority of district staff. Whereas in the smaller districts most teachers were involved in the STARS process, these activities were handled primarily by relatively small committees in the larger districts. Teachers from one large district were worried that three or four people were making decisions about assessment for the entire district. Others stated that it was difficult to "sell" their plans to the entire staff because "those who didn't help in the development don't have the same sense of ownership."

Suggestions for Improvements in the Process

Suggestions for improvements in the process were remarkably consistent across the districts in this study. Foremost among these was for more consistency regarding the requirements for STARS. Teachers felt that the information they received from different sources, such as their

ESU, the state, and their district leadership, was often contradictory. Most districts also felt that the information received from state officials changed frequently. While most teachers we spoke to understood that state officials were "trying to do something different and learning as they go" they suggested that the state should have "waited till they got their feet on the ground a little bit." Teachers also felt that having examples or models available and knowing the quality criteria "up front" would have been very helpful.

Another consistent suggestion on which state officials have already taken action was to slow down the original timeline. One group of teachers suggested that a year of training and assessment workshops before even beginning the STARS process would have been a good idea. Teachers also appeared to be frustrated with the paperwork involved in documenting the assessment results and suggested that a system be put into place that would make documentation less time-consuming.

Finally, teachers in several districts were concerned about the fact that members of the public and the media were trying to compare assessment results across districts, even though such comparisons were clearly not warranted. These teachers recognized that assessments differed in terms of difficulty and quality across districts, and that districts had set different criteria for passing. One teacher felt that some schools had tried to "get away with testing at a lower level" because there was "no incentive for making assessments rigorous." Others suggested that more effort needed to be put into educating the public and other constituencies about the inadvisability of comparing district scores.

One State Test or Individual District Assessments?

We asked teachers in each district whether, knowing what they know now, they would prefer to have a single state test or to maintain their individual district assessments? Of the 14 groups of teachers interviewed, ten preferred to keep the district assessment system, while 3 thought they would prefer a statewide test. Teachers from one district were split on this issue.

For the most part, teachers who preferred local assessments to a statewide test held very strong views about this. Those who preferred localized assessments stated that those assessments:

- provided a better match to district agendas
- allowed for greater flexibility in what was taught and tested in the district
- allowed for multiple means of assessment that addressed the multiple needs of students
- provided more useful information to teachers for planning instruction and assessing the needs of students

Teachers in this group felt that teachers had learned a lot by creating local assessments. Some teachers also remarked that creating district assessments had resulted in more consistency in the curriculum across grade levels.

Reasons given for preferring a statewide test included:

- less time-consuming
- having more time to teach
- those creating a state test would be more knowledgeable about assessment and psychometric issues and would therefore create a test that was "more accurate"
- local assessments are "too subjective" and too difficult for small districts to construct

A few districts also stated that "since 'they' [it was unclear whether 'they' referred to state officials, the media, the general public, or all of these] want to compare statewide anyway, why not use a state test?"

Teachers from some of the larger districts were not sure whether the other teachers in their districts would agree with their answers to this question. But as one teacher put it, "I don't think other teachers care as long as they know in advance what's expected of them." Another remarked that "In general I think teachers are appreciative of not having everything come from the top down. I think teachers appreciate ownership."

Changes in Teachers' Knowledge of Assessment

Nearly all of the teachers we spoke with stated that they had learned more about assessment as a result of working on their district's assessments. When asked to specify the types of knowledge they had gained, teachers cited the following areas:

- How to create assessments that reflect the standards.
- How to focus their teaching on what's important and then assess those things.
- How to create and use rubrics. Many teachers extolled the benefits of rubrics, including:
    - Students work harder when they see the rubric ahead of time.
    - Students know what is expected of them and can explain what they need to know or do.
    - Students know what teachers expect.
    - Rubrics provide clear demonstrations of what students can do that can be shown to parents.

  One teacher pointed out that while she felt she could grade just as well without the benefit of a rubric, she felt they were valuable to students because "If you give a kid a target then they can hit the target."
- How to make questions less ambiguous and more easily understood.
- To refocus on the purpose of assessment, which is to "give students feedback and improve learning." For many teachers this focus included the use of more formative assessments with more opportunities for practice.
- How to use methods such as student observations and informal questioning more systematically to gather assessment information.

Not every teacher we spoke with was positive about the standards-based assessments and the knowledge they gained from creating them, however. A teacher in one district appeared to be speaking for her/his colleagues when s/he stated that what they had learned was that "they didn't want to learn about assessment." Part of the reason for this comment was that assessment "involves statistics and most teachers can't understand that." These teachers felt that student learning was being "reduced to statistics" and that too much teacher time was being spent on preparing assessments and reports instead of teaching.

An interesting finding was that, although most teachers we spoke with felt they had learned a great deal about assessment as a result of STARS, few of these teachers reported changes in their individual classroom assessment practices. Of the changes teachers did make, the use of rubrics and more generally, sharing of their grading criteria with students was mentioned most often. Other changes included dropping assessments they felt did not "hit the target" and being more careful to make the wording and

instructions for assessments clear and unambiguous. Teachers also reported more use of less traditional forms of assessment such as teacher observations, asking questions of students in class, checklists, and portfolios.

Changes in Classroom Instruction

We asked teachers whether they had changed their classroom instructional practices as a result of STARS. Almost all of the teachers in our study stated that they were able to better focus their instruction as a result of STARS. Teachers stated that they now put more thought into whether or not an activity or assessment was going to be "worthwhile" in terms of "hitting the standard." Teachers also felt that they made "better use of their time" because they were better able to "pick out what's important." Several teachers remarked that they felt they made better use of their classroom time because they had cut out some "pet projects" that they realized they had been doing more for themselves than for the students' benefit. Another benefit of standards-based assessment the teachers cited was that in the process of breaking down the standards in order to create assessments, they developed a much better understanding of exactly what types of student learning each standard entailed and this, in turn, helped them to know what to teach. One teacher remarked "I feel like I'm a lot better teacher" because of her new ability to focus in on these skills and content and "take advantage of more teachable moments" as a result of that.

While greater focus in terms of what they taught was the change that teachers cited most often in their teaching, many teachers also stated that they spent more time reteaching material instead of "trying to cover a certain amount of material." In relation to this, teachers also reported that they now were better able to "key in" on students who were having difficulties and provide remediation for them. A final change in teaching that was mentioned frequently was that teachers shared their grading criteria with their students more often.

What Types of Information Do the Assessments Provide?

When we asked teachers what types of information they thought their district assessments provided, almost all replied that the assessment results demonstrate student strengths and weaknesses. For example, teachers in one district found that students were very lacking in higher order thinking skills and needed to be "pushed more" in that area. Teachers used this type of information to plan their instruction. This type of planning was facilitated because teachers typically received the results of their district assessments immediately. However, several teachers pointed out that the information they obtained from the assessments was information they typically knew anyway through their daily contact with their students. But even teachers in this category admitted that in some cases assessment results had indicated that a student really didn't understand material when the teacher's more informal methods would have caused her to reach the opposite conclusion. Another advantage of the assessments was that the assessment results provided validation of the teachers' informal judgments and documentation of student strengths and weaknesses in a way that teacher observations could not. One teacher stated that the assessment results "gave us permission" to go back and reteach instead of moving on to new material.

Another teacher summed up the advantages of using rubrics by stating that "rubrics can tell us why students are good at something, not just that they are, but what they do that makes them good, or what they need more practice on." She likened this to having a "road map" for each child. Another teacher called the district assessments "almost diagnostic" because they revealed specific strengths and weaknesses, pointing out at the same time that the same was not true for large norm-referenced tests. Yet another teacher explained this as being due to the fact that the district assessments were written by teachers who "knew what we needed to know." Another

aspect of locally constructed assessments that teachers remarked on was that they felt they could actually impact students' scores by what they did in the classroom, whereas with large scale tests they did not feel empowered to do this.

A final benefit of the district assessments that was noted by several teachers was that they allowed teachers to track student progress. This was true not only within grades but also across grades because many districts had aligned both curriculum and assessments across grade levels. A related benefit of this was that it "helped teachers to be on the same page," as one teacher put it.

Does STARS Encourage the View that Assessment is Part of the Learning Process?

Teachers in the majority of the districts we studied answered this question with a qualified "yes." Many teachers said that while they themselves held this view, they did not feel that all teachers in their district felt the same way. In particular, teachers stated that the development of this understanding was one of the benefits of having been involved in the creation of their district assessments, and that teachers who had not been involved did not benefit as much. Other teachers felt that although their district was "moving in that direction" district personnel were still taking a "wait and see attitude" with respect to STARS.

Those teachers who did see assessment as part of the learning process felt that this view was a major advantage of having local assessments as opposed to large scale standardized tests. Teachers felt that the local assessments created a much more dynamic environment in the sense that, if students did not do well teachers could work with them until they had mastered the material. Teachers also felt that they had more control over the timing of the assessments than they would have had with a more standardized test, and this gave them a sense of ownership and control over student outcomes. However, at least one teacher stated that administrators did not realize how important this flexibility was, resulting in frustration on the part of teachers. Block scheduling was also cited as a hindrance to flexible scheduling of assessments.

Many teachers stated that they assessed "almost daily" and that students had come to expect this. The incorporation of assessment into the learning process did not come easily, however. As one teacher stated "It was a struggle learning how that all sifted out, but it's really helped in the long run." Others supported the viewpoint that achievement of this level of understanding was a slow and sometimes painful progression, and suggested that moving more slowly through the STARS process might have resulted in less negativity among teachers overall.

Student Motivation and Anxiety

Many opponents of large-scale standardized tests argue that such tests cause unnecessary test anxiety, resulting in invalid scores. It has also been argued that some students do not try their best on such tests because they know the results will have no bearing on their grades. Such arguments often carry the implicit or explicit corollary that smaller scale classroom or teacher-made tests do not have these undesirable consequences. It was therefore of interest in this evaluation to gather information about students' levels of anxiety and motivation in taking the STARS assessments.

In the process of asking these questions, it became apparent that teachers approached the introduction of their district assessment very differently. Some teachers stated that they de-emphasized the importance of the assessments, especially with elementary school students, so that students would not develop unnecessary anxiety about the assessments. In some cases teachers stated that students did not even realize they were being tested because the district's assessments were incorporated into students' every day assignments. Other teachers told their students the assessments were important in order to motivate them to do their best.

Districts also had widely different assessment processes. In some districts, assessments were administered very much like standardized tests, with all students taking the assessments during the same time frame under standardized conditions. Districts also appeared to differ in whether students were allowed to retake assessments. In some districts, material from assessments on which students had not done well was re-taught and students were re-assessed while in other districts assessments were a "one shot deal." In some districts, therefore, assessments were summative while in others they were formative. In districts taking the latter perspective, assessments tended to be given frequently, and teachers often reported that students became "used to" taking the assessments. One second-grade teacher even reported that her students seemed to enjoy taking the assessments.

Overall, teachers stated what is probably obvious: some students are simply more motivated or more anxious than others regardless of the task or situation. While this is no doubt true, some differences seemed to emerge in terms of the approaches discussed above. Teachers from districts in which assessments were incorporated into the daily curriculum as assignments or other class work often stated that students were not anxious about these assessments, either because they were so used to taking them or because they saw them as simply another assignment rather than as a "test." One teacher suggested another reason for students' relative lack of anxiety on these district assessments: students feel prepared for them and know what to expect.

With regard to motivation, several teachers from districts in which assessments were incorporated into the curriculum stated that their students actually seemed more motivated for the district assessments than for large-scale standardized tests. These teachers offered several speculations as to why this may have been the case. One thought the fact that students' own teachers saw their results may have been motivating to students. Another stated that "students are taking it more seriously because we are." A teacher from another district seemed to agree with this appraisal, alluding to the need for teachers to strive for a climate of "always expecting the best." These teachers pointed out that assessments in these classrooms were being used as motivators, not as threats or punishment, and students seemed to absorb this attitude.

Most, if not all, of the districts in which assessments were incorporated into daily classroom activities used rubrics for their assessments with which students were familiar. Because of this, teachers at two different districts suggested that students were more motivated because they had a better understanding of the assessment process, and thus assumed greater ownership of the results. Finally, one teacher suggested that students were more motivated because the tasks incorporated on their assessments were more authentic.

Teachers had some suggestions they felt would help in the process of incorporating assessment into the instructional cycle. First among these was the need to educate teachers about assessment and its purposes. Teachers we spoke with felt that **all** teachers, not just those on assessment committees, should receive this training. These teachers also felt that the STARS process should move slowly so that all teachers could be "brought onboard" and applauded state officials for slowing down the original timeline, saying "that was a very smart thing to do…we are very thankful."

Finally, teachers felt that the current reporting schedule put too much pressure on the tested grades. Teachers reported that fourth graders in particular, appeared to be more anxious about the assessments than their counterparts in adjacent grades, and these teachers suggested spreading the reported assessments more evenly across the grade levels.

Special Test Preparation Activities

One concern that has been raised with regard to high-stakes standardized testing is that it results in "teaching to the test." In other words, it is argued that teachers tend to teach students only the specific types of information, skills, and item formats that are on the assessments, with the result that students do not develop broadly based skills and knowledge. Because most of the STARS assessments are not high-stakes in the sense that they are not used to make decisions about promotion or graduation (at least at the present time), it was of interest to determine whether these assessments still resulted in teaching to the test.

We asked teachers if they used any special test preparation activities prior to administering their district assessments. Virtually all of the teachers with whom we spoke stated that they did not do much test preparation. The most common reason given for this was that, because many districts had simply adapted in-class exercises and assignments for their assessments, students were familiar with the content and format of the district assessments and did not need any extra preparation. As one teacher put it, " We just teach," referring to the fact that, because the assessments covered the state standards, and these standards were the focus of classroom learning, there was no need to do anything out of the ordinary to prepare students. One teacher stated that students seemed to do better on district assessments than on large-scale standardized tests because the activities on the district assessments were "not as foreign to them." It was also interesting to note that, in their answers to several of the questions we asked, some teachers stated that they felt the implementation of their district assessments had raised expectations and that teachers were expecting more from students than they had previously.

Teachers from several districts did state that they gave students practice assessments that were similar to the district assessment. Several teachers also said that they showed students the rubric that would be used for the assessment and went over the expectations it implied. Although teachers from one of the larger districts we studied stated that they provided snacks and incentives for students when they took large-scale standardized tests, they did not mention any such activities in conjunction with their district assessments.

Benefits of District Assessments to Students

We asked teachers how, if at all, they felt that students benefited from taking the district language arts assessments. Answers to this question appeared to depend on the type of assessments the district had adopted. Those districts that had created assessments for which a rubric was used in grading stated that use of the rubrics helped students develop their abilities to self-assess. Two teachers also felt that use of the rubrics motivated students by making it easier for them to set their own goals. Another teacher pointed out that the fact that the rubric "broke things down" making it easier for students to see their specific strengths and weaknesses.

Several teachers cited the ability of the language arts assessments to reveal students' strengths and weaknesses as an important benefit. As one teacher stated, "some don't want to accept they have weaknesses" in the absence of evidence to the contrary, and having concrete evidence in the form of assessment results was useful in demonstrating such weaknesses. With regard to student strengths, teachers felt that obtaining good results on the assessments caused students to gain confidence in their abilities.

Teachers stressed that obtaining the assessment results immediately was crucial to their ability to identify problems and provide remediation. One teacher observed that this was one of the things that made the district assessments more useful to them than large-scale standardized assessments. Teachers who did not obtain feedback or who felt that feedback was not provided in a timely manner expressed frustration over this. In one such district, teachers remarked that they had not seen much benefit from their district assessments.

In a slightly different vein, one teacher remarked that she felt that teachers now "did a better job, and that benefits kids." As in other questions, however, teachers' comments were not uniformly positive. Teachers in one district stated that, although the assessments did benefit students, the students were tired of being assessed so much. In another district teachers felt that STARS had "not really changed things because we were already doing well." The latter comment represents a theme that ran through the replies of several teachers to our questions. These teachers felt that their districts had been educating students very well before the advent of STARS and did not understand the need for any reforms.

Accommodations for Special Needs and English Language Learners

Assessment accommodations for special needs students has become an important issue in testing because more students are being required to participate in testing as a result of federal inclusion policies. We were therefore interested in finding out how these students were accommodated on district language arts assessments. This was an issue about which teachers clearly felt they did not have enough information. Although teachers in nearly every district knew that acceptable accommodations for special needs students were included on students' IEPs, teachers who had not had such students in their classes did not seem to be aware of what these might entail. Most teachers answered this question by stating that special needs students were sent "to the resource room" to take the assessments. In three districts, however, teachers stated that specific accommodations had been written into their district assessments with the help of their special education and ELL staff.

Teachers had clear concerns in this area. These concerns were of two types. Some teachers felt that accommodations were not being implemented uniformly across their district or across the state, and that these practices should be standardized. These teachers expressed a desire for more training in this area, and some felt that state officials had not been clear with regard to these issues. Other teachers felt that it was not fair or reasonable for students with special needs to be required to complete all of the district assessments because some of the assessments were clearly too difficult for them. One teacher pointed out that these students may not need to know the same things as students in regular education and that as a result, might not be taught the material on the district assessments.

Teachers in most districts reported that they had no ELL students and were therefore not aware of any accommodations for these students. In fact, only one of the districts we studied had substantial levels of ELL students (15%). In this district teachers informed us that ELL teachers in the district had developed alternative assessments and accommodations for teachers to use.

Final Comments

In wrapping up our interviews, we asked teachers if they had anything to add to what had been said previously. Many of the comments made reiterated or expanded on issues that had been brought up during the interviews. On the positive side, teachers reported such things as:

- Students becoming more accepting of assessments.
- Teachers developing a "common language" around STARS and become more cohesive.
- Development of what one teacher called a "living curriculum" that ties into both standards and assessments, and is consistent K-12.
- New "road map" made possible by the state standards has allowed districts to "abandon some things instead of trying to do more and more and not feel guilty about leaving things out."

Teachers in one district felt that the fact that teachers had designed their assessments made them easier to "sell" to other teachers in their district. However, they expressed concern that some teachers "still don't buy in." Those in another district expressed a similar sentiment, stating that even though the assessment process was a lot work, at least they hadn't had someone "shoving it down our throats." They also felt that even though teachers who had not been part of the assessment team might feel as though it was being "shoved down their throats…at least it's their peers."

Teachers in other districts took the opportunity to criticize the STARS process. In one district in particular, teachers took pains to point out that their criticisms were directed toward the *process* and not the *idea* of STARS. These teachers felt that STARS "might have worked" if the process had been made simpler, less statistical, and more reliant on the professionalism of teachers. These teachers were among those who felt that they were already doing their job well, and did not understand the need for change. Teachers in another, smaller district suggested that STARS assessments 1) not take up too much classroom time, 2) "give something to parents, teachers, and students", and 3) not create too much paperwork for teachers. These teachers were concerned over the fact that they had not received any results from the language arts assessments they had given. A teacher in a third district stated that s/he was excited about STARS at first because it seemed that it would place more emphasis on teaching and learning. However, this teacher was disappointed in the assessments created in her/his district because they were "too complicated" due to trying to combine assessment of too many standards. Another teacher in this district felt that STARS had not really changed anything because "good teachers are still good teachers …and the others still need help." Finally, one teacher in another district stated that "sometimes we feel like we have spent a lot of time and a lot of energy doing it [creating assessments] and we are not the experts." This teacher felt that it would be better to have "experts" create the assessments because teachers do not have the time or expertise. Teachers in this district also felt that their district administration did not show enough leadership in the STARS process.

Conclusions

In trying to determine what made teachers in some districts feel so positively toward their district's STARS process while those in other districts were quite negative, we investigated several hypotheses. One of these was that the negativity expressed by teachers in some districts was simply "sour grapes" due to the fact that these districts had been disappointed in the feedback received on their District Assessment Portfolio (DAP). However, after obtaining ratings for the more negative districts, we found that only one of them received a low overall rating ("unacceptable") while the others received rating of either "very good" or "acceptable." This distribution of ratings was not notably different from those of districts in which the teachers expressed more positive attitudes, so this hypothesis does not appear to be tenable.

We also felt that a lack of leadership in the district might have contributed to negative feelings on the part of teachers. This does seem to be the case to some extent. Of the four schools in which teachers were most negative, three appeared to lack sufficient leadership in their STARS process. One consequence of this lack of leadership was that teachers in these districts began developing assessments before having aligned their curricula with the state standards. As teachers in these districts commented, this made it very difficult to create unified assessment plans. It was interesting to note that, although most of these districts ultimately did complete at least some curriculum alignment, teachers in two of the districts still appeared to see the state content standards as an "add-on" to their own curricula, rather than as a full curriculum for the district. For example, one teacher reported that "it takes three weeks out of the curriculum to cover the … standards." We also found that teachers in these districts were more likely to feel that the

information they received about STARS was inconsistent and inadequate and to experience failures or delays in receiving student results.

Recommendations

Based on our study of the interview transcripts and analysis of district characteristics, we offer the following recommendations:

1) *Continue to closely monitor districts' progress in the STARS process and delay the current timeline if districts appear to be overwhelmed*. Not having sufficient time to prepare and implement their assessment plans was one of the biggest complaints of the teachers we interviewed. Creating quality assessments and assessment plans is a difficult and time-consuming process. Major testing companies typically take up to five years to create and introduce a new product. While most of the teachers we spoke with felt that the time they spent working on their district's STARS process was ultimately worthwhile, teachers are very busy people and even the most willing have limited amounts of time to spend on these activities. This is especially true in small districts with limited resources. While it is true that some districts we studied did not begin their STARS preparations in a timely fashion, at least some of their procrastination seems to have been due to an honest lack of understanding of the tasks involved and lack of knowledge regarding assessment development. While ESUs offered valuable guidance in some districts, other districts were less fortunate in this regard.

2) *Provide resources for districts to compensate teachers for the time spent on STARS activities*. As one administrator stated, the STARS activities in which teachers engage are valuable learning opportunities for teachers. As noted above, they are also quite time-consuming and it seems only fair that teachers be compensated for these extra hours. In addition to the issue of fairness, compensating teachers for time spent on these activities sends a message that they are truly valued at the district and state level.

3) *Encourage districts to work together in assessment development when feasible*. Many of the districts we studied were quite small and lacked many of the resources available to larger districts. This created a much heavier workload for teachers in these districts that could be alleviated by joining in consortia with other districts. It should be stressed, however, that districts forming such consortia must have a common vision of the needs of the districts involved. If this is not the case, working in consortia can become more of a hindrance than a help.

4) *Encourage **all** teachers to become involved in STARS activities in some way.* The teachers we spoke with repeatedly stated that they wished more teachers would become involved in the STARS process. Such involvement would have at least two benefits: teachers would have a better understanding and more ownership of the district's assessments and teachers would gain knowledge and skills in assessment that would benefit their own classroom practice.

5) *Continue to provide training in the development and evaluation of different types of assessments and on the six quality criteria.* Some teachers still do not feel that they have the expertise necessary to create and evaluate their district's assessments. The state has done an excellent job of providing training in these

areas, using a variety of formats from in-service workshops to informal teacher learning groups. Such training activities should be continued with a focus on evaluation of their relative levels of effectiveness. Teachers who have developed a high level of expertise in particular areas of assessment as a result of some of these training programs might be asked to facilitate training sessions in their district or ESU area. As some teachers noted in their interviews, training sessions presented by other teachers from the same district are often more meaningful to teachers than training presented by "outside experts." In this vein, we applaud the state for the inclusion of exemplary district practices on the NDE webpage.

6) *Educate administrators in assessment literacy and issues pertaining to assessment and encourage them to become involved in their district assessment process.* Overall, districts in which administrators were seen by teachers as being invested in the assessment process through personal involvement, encouragement of those involved, provision of rewards for those involved, or other activities had more positive experiences with their assessment development process. Teachers from districts in which the administration was not perceived as being invested in the process were more negative about STARS overall and about their district's assessment process in particular. A frequent complaint was that administrators did not understand the complexity and time-consuming nature of the assessment process, and introduced unnecessary obstacles because of their lack of understanding. We understand that faculty at the University of Nebraska will offer an assessment course specifically designed for school administrators this summer. Other possible actions might be to provide more incentives for administrators to participate in the Nebraska Assessment Cohort, also taught by UNL faculty, and in the assessment workshops given around the state.

7) *Encourage districts to create and use rubrics for all constructed response assessments and make these public.* This recommendation is based on teachers' reports of the benefits of using rubrics that are shared with students to score district assessments. These benefits include greater student motivation and ability to self-assess, clearer understanding of learning targets (on the part of both students and teachers), less anxiety about assessments, and tangible evidence of progress. These benefits have also been documented in the assessment research literature. In addition to being shared with students, rubrics can also be shared with parents. This would help parents in working with their children at home by focusing their efforts on desired learning targets. Good rubrics also break down learning tasks into their smaller components, making them easier for students to master.

8) *Provide explicit guidelines to districts about required documents, procedures, and information **as early as possible**. Whenever possible include examples of what is expected or desired*. Although we recognize that there may be some unavoidable changes after such guidelines have been sent to districts, **any such changes should be minimized.** One of the most frequent complaints we heard, in every district, was that guidelines and requirements were frequently changed while districts were in the process of trying to complete them. Whether these inconsistencies were real or perceived, they caused much anger and anxiety on the part of teachers who were doing their best to fulfill STARS guidelines. While it is certainly understandable that some adjustments to procedures may have been necessary during the first year of implementation, we would encourage state

officials to try to minimize any future changes in requirements or procedures. Because teachers frequently stated that they received inconsistent information from administrators, ESUs, and state officials, it may be the case that, although the state communicated requirements clearly to administrators and ESUs, something was "lost in the translation" when these were subsequently communicated to teachers. One way of ameliorating this situation might be to select an assessment coordinator for each district and send all STARS information to this person as well as to district administration and ESUs. In fact, several teachers in our study stated that they wished information could have been disseminated directly to them.

9) *Educate districts about the importance of returning assessment results to teachers as soon as possible.* Teachers in a small number of districts reported long delays in receiving assessment results, or not receiving results at all. This clearly works against the state's goal of using assessment results to improve learning. We also felt that teachers need more guidance on using assessment results to direct their teaching and to facilitate individual learning. This would be a valuable topic for future workshops or in-service sessions.

10) *Educate teachers about acceptable accommodation practices for student in special education and ELL*. Most teachers we spoke with felt that they did not have sufficient guidance in this area and expressed a desire to learn more. Many teachers were concerned that accommodations were not being implemented uniformly across the state, and that this resulted in some unfairness and lack of equity. This would be another fruitful area for in-service or staff development workshops. There are districts in the state that have done an excellent job in outlining acceptable accommodations, and these districts could be invited to share their ideas. Another possible resource is Dr. Ellin Siegel of the Special Education Department at UNL, who has done research in the area of testing accommodations.

11) *Spread state-reported assessments across grade levels.* Teachers felt that students and teachers in the 4^{th}, 8^{th}, and 11^{th} grades, for which assessment results must be reported to the state, were unduly stressed. Many teachers suggested that such assessments be spread more uniformly across grade levels. For example, math assessment results could be reported in 3^{rd}, 7^{th}, and 10^{th} grades and language arts at 4^{th}, 8^{th}, and 11^{th}, instead of concentrating all reported assessments in the same grades every year. Our impression was that such concentration does impose an undue amount of pressure on these grades, as evidenced by such things as teacher reports of attempting to transfer into other grade levels. Unless there are compelling developmental or educational reasons for confining score reporting to these grades, we agree with teachers that a more balanced approach might create less stress.

12) *Begin investigating ways of addressing the lack of comparability of scores across districts.* This issue continues to be problematic. While we recognize and agree with the intent to avoid comparisons among districts, it is naïve to ignore the fact that such comparisons will inevitably be made. Teachers recognize that such comparisons are unjustified and some proposed that more public education is needed about the nature of district assessment scores and their essential lack of comparability. A more serious issue is the perception on the part of some

teachers that districts deliberately create easy assessments or low passing scores in order to evidence a higher "proficiency" rate. Such perceptions, whether or not they are based on fact, clearly undermine the credibility of STARS. We see this as one of the major dilemmas inherent in STARS.

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Language Arts Assessment Interview Questions

I. Process

- 1) How were you involved with your district's assessment development process (e.g. creation, scoring, remediation, etc.)?
- Describe the process for me. (Did you align your curriculum first? Did you write items for the standards?)
- Overall, what were your impressions of your district's assessment development process? (How did it go?)

II. Value of Process and Assessments

- What kinds of information do you think the Language Arts assessments provide you about your students? (Elaborate.) Is this information beyond what you already knew about your students? Have you used this information in your classroom? (If no – why is that? If yes – how so?)
- Did the assessment development process affect communication in your district? (Between groups such as students, teachers, community, parents.) (If no – what are your thoughts about why it didn't? If yes – where did you see the biggest improvement? What benefits did the increased communication provide?)
- Do you feel assessment is incorporated into the learning process in your district? (Why do you feel this way?)
- Is there anything that could have been done differently by the state, district, or people you worked with to facilitate the development of the process?
- Knowing what you know now, would you have preferred to have a single state test or would you prefer to be able to create your own local assessments? (Why do you feel that way?)

III. Effects on Teachers

- Do you feel you have learned more about assessment from the development process in your district? (If no – tell me about that. If yes – what kinds of things?)
- Have your assessment practices changed as a result of the development process? (If no – ok. If yes – tell me about some of those changes.)
- Have you changed classroom instruction as a result of the implementation? (If no – why is that? If yes – can you tell me about those changes and if you think they are positive or negative?)

IV. Effects on Students

- Do you think your students were anxious about the assessments? (If no – why do you think they were not anxious? If yes – why do you think they were anxious? What could have been done to decrease anxiety?)
- Describe your students' motivation in relation to the Language Arts assessments.

- Did you do any special test preparation activities with your students before the assessments? (If no – why is that? If yes – can you tell me about what you did? How often did you do these activities?)
- Are there ways you think the student benefits from the Language Arts assessments?
- What are the testing accommodations for ELL students in your district? How do you feel about them? What about accommodations for Special Education students? What are they and what do you think about them?

- Do you have anything you would like to add?

APPENDIX K

NDE Strategic Action Plan
in response to
Year One Evaluation Report
August 1, 2002-August 1, 2003

District Assessment Portfolio System Recommendations

- ✓ Promote cross-grade and cross-curricular teamwork.
- ✓ Offer more, or more concrete, feedback to districts on their assessment systems.
- ✓ Build trust in the information generated by STARS.
- ✓ Help more districts incorporate assessment into their ongoing teaching and learning efforts, and STARS into their school improvement processes.

Actions Taken

Workshops, written materials, presentations, and satellite broadcasts emphasized and encouraged K-12 and cross curricular work to integrate assessment into teaching and learning.

Assessment staff made visits to individual districts who indicated they were struggling with "assessment separate from instruction" and assisted staff members in integrating their process.

ARTs (assessment response teams) are being formed in the summer of 2003 to be ready to work directly in districts to help with the cross-curricular and integrated K-12 approaches.

Assessment staff have been working with Educational Service Unit staff in training them to assist districts in the integration of assessment into regular classroom practice.

The Director of Assessment asked the portfolio reviewers for more helpful and concrete feedback on the mathematics portfolios. Districts reported the feedback in 2002 was more complete and helpful.

Statewide Writing Assessment Recommendations:

- ✓ Do not make major changes to the SWA at this time.
- ✓ Sponsor cross-curricular and cross-grade commitments to Six Traits.
- ✓ Help teachers understand not only the inclusion/accommodation procedures for the SWA, but also their purpose in the big picture.
- ✓ Make minor format changes to the test.

- ✓ Offer the option of analytic scoring, or, offer assistance and resources to the local districts that wish to score their own papers analytically.
- ✓ Help teachers and administrators put the test to local use.
- ✓ Move toward a more complex, rigorous, and authentic writing assessment.

Actions Taken:

A "Training Cadre" of individuals to assist in the training of teachers across the state was initiated. These individuals will assist with the cross-grade and cross-curricular connections. They will also assist in the understanding of analytical scoring.

NDE is collaborating with regional sites in establishing analytical writing procedures to be made available to districts across the state.

The Statewide Writing Assessment Coordinator has teamed with the NDE special education staff in preparing training materials and conducting workshops about the inclusion of all students and in the use of appropriate accommodations.

The Statewide Writing Coordinator has conducted district training to assist teachers in using the results of statewide writing for instructional improvement.

Language Arts Assessment Recommendations:

- ✓ Assist districts in using their assessment information to systematically target students who need help.
- ✓ Promote more teacher participation in district assessment portfolio development and assembly.
- ✓ Maintain focus on local assessments, not national, norm-referenced exams.

Actions Taken:

Educational service units and NDE staff have conducted data retreats and workshops sharing information and strategies in "Now that we have data, what do we do?"

District Assessment Portfolio workshops have been conducted across the state sharing information with teachers and administrators in the portfolio process.

NDE staff have made district visits throughout the state encouraging districts to more directly involve teachers in the portfolio development process.

Nebraska has continued to maintain its focus on locally developed assessment and to stand firm to emphasize the STARS approach, rather than a norm-referenced approach. Multiple presentations within the state and outside of Nebraska emphasize the importance of local assessment development.

Recommendations for State Leadership:

- ✓ Continue present leadership emphases: vision-building, involving local educators and administrators, investing in professional development, educating all stakeholders, and partnering with higher education.
- ✓ Integrate local expertise and successes into ongoing professional development efforts.
- ✓ Involve more community members, especially parents, in STARS.
- ✓ Enhance involvement in teacher education.

Actions Taken:

Conducted additional advisory groups regarding the integration of NCLB (No Child Left Behind) into STARS: groups studying Adequate Yearly Progress, 3-8 testing, the STARS Advisory.

Continued development of the Assessment Cohort through the University of Nebraska. Initiated a third veteran teacher cohort, began an undergraduate assessment cohort, and initiated a new cohort for principals and leadership.

Initiated the process for making the Assessment Cohort a graduate endorsement – will be the only such endorsement in the United States. Process was initiated with committee, taken to NCATE, and will be finalized at a 3rd reading in June of 2003.

Involved assessment literacy training for parents, superintendents, school board members, principals, and higher education. Rick Stiggins did large and small group presentations three times in the 2002-2003 school year. (December 2002, February 2003, and March 2003).

Initiated a framework for the preservice preparation of teachers in assessment literacy. All seventeen institutions are involved, and will be part of the framework development in the summer of 2003. The result will be a set of requirements for assessment literacy preparation across all institutions of higher education.

Recommendations for Local Leadership:

- ✓ Help districts engage their local communities.
- ✓ Help districts get ALL teachers on board.
- ✓ Help districts use STARS as a vehicle for school improvement.
- ✓ Continue to invest in local educators.
- ✓ Continue to demonstrate awareness of time restraints.

Actions Taken:

NDE personnel have visited local districts to share ways for all teacher involvement – the hope is that the ART Teams (Assessment Response Teams) established in 2003 will be another vehicle for encouraging and modeling appropriate involvement and time management strategies.

A brochure, “Know your Schools” was developed and distributed to all Nebraska’s schools in an attempt to help with the use of the State of the Schools Website in local communities.

School improvement seminars have been conducted across the state and within Educational Service Units.

STAR grants providing money for professional development have been continued through the use of federal funds.

Two additional actions are relevant to the year one report:

The Statewide Policy forum moved from the question, “How does one use data to improve and energize school improvement” to the question, “What opportunities (essential curriculum) should be available for all Nebraska students?” Forums included parents, state and local board members, legislators, teachers, and administrators.

The Nebraska Department of Education has undertaken an internal reorganization aimed at a more integrated, team-based approach, once again modeling what is being asked of schools.