

Nebraska STARS Line Up

In the face of the great nationwide push for standardized testing, Nebraska has established a system that relies on local educators to design their own assessments. Ms. Roschewski reports on the progress of this unique initiative.

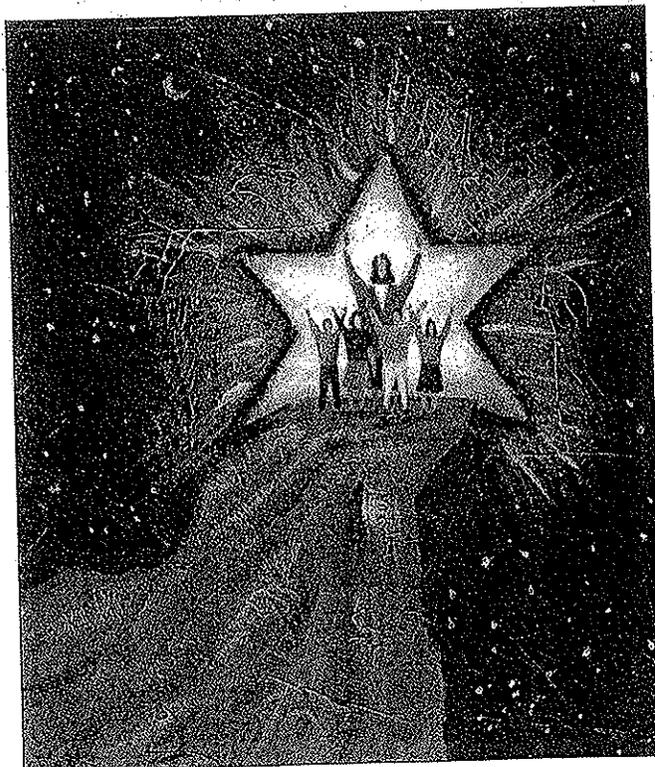
BY PAT ROSCHEWSKI

THE APPROACH to standards, assessment, and accountability in Nebraska is unlike that in any other state. Nebraska's STARS (School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System) is not based on external mandates and compliance but relies instead on the professional judgment of teachers about whether their students are learning. Commissioner Doug Christensen has remained steadfast in his belief that "decisions about student learning reside in the classroom where learning occurs, not in the legislature, the governor's office, or the department of education."¹

The Nebraska STARS plan is ambitious and somewhat idealistic. It provides statewide public accountability, but its first priorities and purpose are student achievement and school improvement. Ken Jones and Paul Ongtooguk have suggested that there are measures of success other than standardized test scores, including "local performance assessments and informed teacher judgments."² Nebraska's STARS system includes these elements and more.

Nebraska's alternative to a single state test has been fully operational since the 2000-01 school year, and it

1. . . ROSCHEWSKI is director of statewide assessment, Nebraska Department of Education, Lincoln.



is working. The STARS have lined up, and the assessment results are in. They have been tabulated, analyzed, and shared. Nebraska students, educators, school communities, and policy makers have data that support the underlying premise that teachers are professionally capable of having what Chris Gallagher has called a "seat at the table."³ In this article, I wish to share our early results and bring readers up to date on Nebraska's journey to the STARS.

AN IMPOSSIBLE DREAM?

Local school districts are required to measure their students on Nebraska's rigorous content standards in grades 4, 8, and 11. But each district may select the assessment tools most appropriate for its students and classrooms. In general, school districts use a norm-referenced test in combination with locally designed criterion-referenced and classroom-based assessments to measure performance against the standards. In addition, every school district participates in a statewide writing assessment that is systematically administered and scored on a statewide basis. The bottom line is that educators in local Nebraska school districts are required to do three things: identify clear learning targets (standards), locally measure those targets accurately and appropriately (assessment), and use the assessment data to improve instruction (accountability).

Beginning in 2000, with the assistance of the 18 regional educational service units and in partnership with the Nebraska Department of Education, Nebraska educators began to design local assessments and are continuing in these efforts through the present. Teachers throughout the state have spent hours in professional development focused on assessment literacy and on learning about developing high-quality assessments. As Richard Stiggins has pointed out, educators spend between one-third and one-half of their time in assessing student performance, but most have not been prepared to do so.⁴ In response, Nebraska has invested in its educators and their professional development. In the words of one Nebraska teacher, "This process has forced us to learn how to accurately measure the student learning in our classrooms. We don't have to rely on our intuition anymore about whether or not our students are learning."⁵

In order for each of Nebraska's 537 (now 504) school districts to assess locally and to report student results on the rigorous state standards, it was necessary to ensure that each district's assessment system was sound.

Therefore, with the assistance of the Buros Center for Testing at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, the state department of education established "Six Quality Assessment Criteria" to serve as guidelines for school districts to use in judging the quality of their assessment systems. These criteria are as follows: 1) the assessment matches the standards; 2) the students have had an opportunity to learn the content being measured; 3) the assessment has been reviewed for bias; 4) the assessment is at the appropriate level; 5) the scoring of the assessment is reliable; and 6) the mastery levels are appropriate.

The challenge for the state was to fulfill the requirements of the law, which required contracting with "assessment experts" in order to review, evaluate, and rate each district's local assessment system. In other words, the state of Nebraska was required to assess each local school district's assessment system and rate its quality. Many thought that the Nebraska plan was an impossible dream.

But the impossible dream was not impossible. With the assistance and technical advice of the Buros Center, Nebraska educators, policy makers, and assessment experts from all over the country went to work side by side. As the plan began to unfold, everyone



"It's kind of complicated. My dog didn't eat my homework, but my hamster did. Then, my dog ate my hamster."

the state realized that this was a daunting task never undertaken. However, we remained determined that decisions about student learning could be accurately and appropriately made by teachers, using high-quality local and classroom assessments. In fact, we believed that the unintended consequences of an externally driven, statewide standardized test could be harmful to the quality of education in our state. In the words of Barbara Plake, the director of the Buros Center, "Nebraska educators are really pioneers. No one has ever before attempted this approach to assessment."⁶ The STARS were lining up, but in 2000 we had not yet reached them.

RESULTS: ASSESSMENT QUALITY AND STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Each Nebraska school district was required to submit a District Assessment Portfolio that included the local assessment procedures and a randomly selected sample of assessments used to measure student achievement on the standards. In June 2001, the first portfolios were submitted for the reading, speaking, and listening standards. Nationally recognized assessment experts were flown to Lincoln to serve as advisors, and 16 assessment reviewers from all over the nation were contracted through the Buros Center to conduct the reviews of the portfolios.

All 537 school districts turned in District Assessment Portfolios that were developed either independently or by consortia of school districts. Throughout the summer of 2001, the 16 experts rated the portfolios describing reading, speaking, and listening assessments. The reviews were based on the "Six Quality Assessment Criteria" that had been outlined with the assistance of the Buros Center. Individual feedback on each portfolio was provided to each Nebraska school district in October 2001. In addition, as required by the legislation, model assessment practices were identified from within those portfolios, and the information was disseminated to all school districts throughout the state.

In the fall of 2001, the first results for the quality of the assessments in reading, speaking, and listening were judged to be encouraging. According to reports from the state department, the independent review of the District Assessment Portfolio systems determined that 91% of districts had at least one portfolio earning a rating of "acceptable" or higher. Fourteen percent received "exemplary" ratings; 46%, "very good"; 4%, "good"; 27%, "acceptable"; and 9%, "unacceptable."

The quality of a district's assessment system and the

actual student results collected within that assessment system are linked. For that reason, the ratings on both assessment quality and student performance, though independently earned, are joined in a graphic display when reported to the public. In addition, all student characteristics and demographics serve as the context of student learning. Thus these characteristics are displayed along with the two ratings.

The performance of Nebraska school districts on reading, speaking, and listening standards was positive. With the assistance of the Buros Center, the Nebraska Department of Education convened educators from across the state in order to determine the ranges of student performance that corresponded to each of the ratings for school districts. These two indicators and the percentage of districts at each level of student performance are displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1.

Student Performance and District Ratings

Rating	Percentage of Students Meeting Standards	Percentage of Districts Earning Rating
Exemplary	85-100	26
Very Good	67-84	34
Good	50-66	17
Acceptable	30-49	6
Unacceptable	Below 29	17

The results, collected in an electronic reporting system, can be accessed through the Nebraska Department of Education website (www.nde.state.ne.us). Data on the student assessments, as well as a great deal of demographic data with regard to teacher qualifications and building and district information, are made available in order to provide the context for the ratings of student performance and of assessment quality.

One must be clear about the intentions of the data collected in the Nebraska STARS system. The system is *not* intended to be a means of comparing school districts by arraying them along a bell-shaped curve. Rather, STARS is intended to focus on student learning and assessment quality. STARS is a criterion-referenced model that measures school and district performance against a rigorous set of criteria: student content standards and assessment quality standards. The goals of STARS are very different from the goals of the high-stakes models used in other states to rank order school districts. Being able to measure school improvement over time is the outcome that has driven Nebraska educators in their reach for the STARS, and this is the goal that Nebraska continues to reach for.

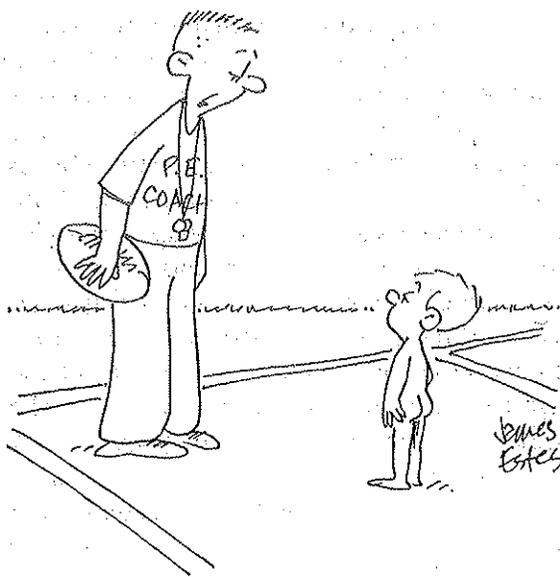
WHAT'S NEXT FOR NEBRASKA?

Nebraska cannot claim that all of the STARS have been reached, because they have not. That is, not all of the state's goals have been achieved, nor have all of its problems been solved. Challenges are on the horizon, not the least of which is to support schools that are in need of improvement and to find ways to integrate the federal No Child Left Behind legislation into the state approach. But the educators in Nebraska have learned many huge lessons and made great strides as the state has moved into the world of standards, assessment, and accountability.

Among the many things we have learned in the process is one primary understanding: it was not wishing upon STARS that made this approach to standards, assessment, and accountability a reality. No, it was leadership, the work of Nebraska educators, and a commitment to the children and schools that have brought Nebraskans to a place where the STARS have lined up. In the words of Commissioner Christensen, "We are not working toward common ground, but toward higher ground. Our job is to build trees under whose shade we will never sit. We must do this for our children and our children's children."⁷

So Nebraskans will continue to reach. We will continue to strive to build on the efforts of the dedicated educators and policy makers across the state. Then and only then will we have the chance to fully reach the STARS.

I. Doug Christensen, address to Nebraska administrators, Kearney,



"You are on the 'skins' team, Robert, but . . ."

March 2002.

2. Ken Jones and Paul Ongtooguk, "Equity for Alaska Natives: Can High-Stakes Testing Bridge the Chasm Between Ideals and Reality?" *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2002, p. 502.

3. Chris Gallagher, "A Seat at the Table: Teachers Reclaiming Assessment Through Rethinking Accountability," *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2000, pp. 502-7.

4. Richard Stiggins, "Confronting the Barriers to Effective Assessment," *School Administrator*, December 1998, p. 6.

5. Discussion during Portfolio Workshop, Lincoln, Neb., May 2001.

6. Barbara Plake, presentation at work session with Nebraska educators, Wakefield, June 2000.

7. Christensen, op. cit.

An Allegory on Educational Testing

(Continued from page 516)

of the year from New York, has succinctly stated:

In the new system, schools were gradually re-formed to meet the pressing need of big businesses to have standardized customers and employees, standardized because such people are predictable in certain crucial ways by mathematical formulae. Business (and government) can only be efficient if human beings are redesigned to meet simplified specifications. As the century wore on, school spaces themselves were opened bit by bit to commercialization.³

To date, no end to the damage is in sight. Yet someday, someone will be granted the prize. It will not be granted by the commissioner, or by the chancellor, or by the Board of Regents. More than likely, it will be an act of the legislature or some other arm of the government that will validate the John Harrisons of the educational world. For John Harrison, genius and craftsman, because of his inability to write, would not be eligible for any diploma offered in this state. I pray that we do not have to wait 40 years for the prize to be granted.

1. Robert M. Hauser, "Evaluation of the New York State Regents Examinations as Requirements for High School Graduation," report presented to the New York State Education Department, Albany, 2001; and Walter M. Haney, "Affidavit in Support of the New York Performance Standards Consortium's (NYPSC) Article 78 Petition," filed with the Supreme Court of the State of New York, Albany, 2001.

2. David H. Monk, Kieran Killeen, and John W. Sipple, *Adoption and Adaptation: New York State School Districts' Responses to State Imposed High School Graduation Requirements: An Eight-Year Retrospective* (Albany: Education Finance Research Consortium, Center for Policy Research, State University of New York, 2001); and Dianna L. Newman and Dean T. Spaulding, *New York State's General Equivalency Diploma Program: Perceptions of Young Adults* (Albany: Evaluation Consortium, State University of New York, 2001).

3. John Taylor Gatto, "American Education History Tour," 2002 available at www.johntaylorgatto.com/historytour/history5.htm.