

***Charting STARS: The State of Assessment in the  
State of Nebraska***



***Year One Report***

***Research Study and Comprehensive Evaluation of Nebraska's  
School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS)***

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Note: Unless otherwise noted, the analyses and views expressed in this report are those of Dr. Gallagher and his research assistants.

***Charting STARS: The State of Assessment in the State of Nebraska***  
**Year One Report**  
**STARS Research and Evaluation Study**

***EXECUTIVE SUMMARY***

This report emerges from the first year of a multiyear study contracted by the Nebraska Department of Education through the University of Nebraska's Teachers College Institute. A team of six UNL researchers employed a variety of research methods – including surveys, interviews, observational research, and discourse analysis – to study the effects and effectiveness of the state's unique School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS). Following the design of the research, the report is organized as follows:

- ◆ District Assessment Portfolio (DAP) System (Chapter 2)
- ◆ Statewide Writing Assessment (Chapter 3)
- ◆ Language Arts Assessment (Chapter 4)
- ◆ Leadership (Chapter 5)
- ◆ Summary Recommendations (Chapter 6)

Overall, this study finds the state of assessment in the state of Nebraska to be healthy but somewhat tenuous. First of all, STARS enjoys a fair level of support from its major stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, the media, the legislature, and community members. This is especially true for the Statewide Writing Assessment (SWA), where we find warm support for Six Trait writing, the instructional program that forms the backbone of the SWA. (The writing examination itself finds less support.)

The study also shows a high level of professional development among both teachers and administrators – another sign of a healthy standards, assessment, and accountability system. Though high-quality professional development remains an ongoing need, teachers and administrators have made important gains in “assessment literacy” as a result of the capacity-building efforts of NDE, Educational Service Units, and districts.

Most significantly, our research reveals that STARS is having positive impact on curriculum and classroom instruction. Teachers report improved communication and collaboration on curriculum design, and more focus on key curricular areas, such as writing. They also report using assessment to identify and address students' strengths and weaknesses as learners. (Systematic or programmatic approaches to targeted instruction, however, are lacking in many districts.)

At the same time, STARS faces several major challenges. The support we have detected for the system, first of all, is tenuous. Many stakeholders are taking a “wait and see” attitude, and look upon this unique system with considerable skepticism. This is especially so among teachers and administrators for whom assessment and reporting, at the state level, is a new experience. As is true in states across the country, teachers are also understandably fearful that they are being “deprofessionalized,” as their workload intensifies and the screws of accountability are tightened. In light of these concerns,

teachers are responding exceptionally positively to the new demands placed on them, mainly because they are committed to teaching and learning and hopeful that STARS will help them improve as educators.

Still, too many teachers seem to be “opting out” of STARS because they do not teach at the reporting levels (4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup>). At present, far too much responsibility for assessment and reporting is falling on the shoulders of these reporting-grade teachers. Teachers also are not as actively involved throughout different phases of STARS as they should be in a “teacher-led” system. Specifically, they do not typically play a major role in the development and assembly of District Assessment Portfolios.

STARS would also benefit from the richer engagement of community members and higher education. Several sections of this report point to a need for enhanced partnerships with these important stakeholders.

Perhaps most importantly, many districts have not integrated their work on STARS with their work on school improvement. The mindset shift that places standards, assessment, and accountability at the center of the school improvement effort is crucial to the success of STARS, and it is yet to happen in many places around the state.

In the final analysis, we believe Nebraska stands a good chance of becoming a national leader in assessment and school renewal generally; indeed, STARS is already receiving significant national attention. It is also receiving strong leadership at both the state and local levels. In order for this unique system to work, however, it will need to promote significant growth in both commitment and capacity, especially among teachers, the putative leaders of the system. STARS will also need the support and involvement of other partners, including community members and higher education, in order to fulfill its aims. We believe the results of this study show that progress has already been achieved in all of these areas, but further research will be necessary to track continued growth.

Summaries of results for each section of the study follow.

## DISTRICT ASSESSMENT PORTFOLIO (DAP) SYSTEM

### Findings on DAP Process:

- ✓ The DAP evaluation process is rigorous and thorough.
- ✓ Most districts find the DAP directions clear.
- ✓ Most districts find the timeline for the DAP extremely challenging.
- ✓ The components of the DAP are generally viewed as appropriate.
- ✓ The rating procedure is generally perceived as fair.
- ✓ DAP assembly typically did not promote teamwork or provide opportunities for staff to learn.
- ✓ There is widespread agreement that smaller districts are at a disadvantage in assembling a DAP.

- ✓ Most districts are receiving helpful assistance from their ESUs.
- ✓ Many districts anticipate that Mathematics assessment and reporting will be easier than Language Arts.
- ✓ The DAP is generally considered an accurate reflection of districts' assessment practices, but not of districts' best work.
- ✓ The DAP is serving as a diagnostic tool as districts evaluate their assessment practices.
- ✓ Most districts view the feedback they received from their evaluation as useful, and anticipate changes to their DAP and, even more so, to their assessment practices.
- ✓ There is little sentiment for undertaking major changes to the DAP or to replacing it altogether.

Recommendations for DAP Process:

- *For the present, keep the DAP substantially the same.*
- *Build support for the DAP as a school improvement tool, not a compliance document.*
- *Help districts manage the DAP timeline.*
- *Provide special assistance for DAP assembly to smaller schools.*

Findings on STARS:

- ✓ Participants cited the following **benefits** of STARS:
  - ⇒ STARS honors the good professional work teachers are already doing.
  - ⇒ STARS provides impetus for developing new visions of k-12 education and collegiality across grade levels.
  - ⇒ STARS helps teachers and administrators examine their curriculum critically.
  - ⇒ STARS promotes teachers' professional growth, especially in the area of assessment literacy.
  - ⇒ STARS sponsors positive changes in classroom practice.
  - ⇒ STARS helps educators communicate with their local constituencies.
- ✓ Participants cited the following **challenges** posed by STARS:
  - ⇒ STARS requires a great deal of time.
  - ⇒ Tasks sometimes seem overwhelming.
  - ⇒ Teachers may lack the expertise to carry out STARS.

- ⇒ STARS requires clear and constant communication – to and with all stakeholders.
  - ⇒ The public, and the media, may not understand the purposes and results of STARS.
  - ⇒ STARS requires teachers to make continual adjustments on a short timetable.
- ✓ Participants offered the following **criticisms** of STARS:
    - ⇒ STARS keeps changing, and is not always clearly communicated.
    - ⇒ STARS does not offer sufficient feedback for continuous school improvement.
    - ⇒ The information STARS generates may not be reliable.
    - ⇒ STARS places emphasis on testing to the detriment of teaching.
    - ⇒ STARS does not trust teachers.
- ✓ Participants offered the following **suggestions** for STARS:
    - ⇒ Slow it down.
    - ⇒ Streamline the process.
    - ⇒ Give more concrete feedback.
    - ⇒ Leave high-performing districts alone, or minimize testing (possibly with a single test).
    - ⇒ Continue to honor the work that teachers do.
- ✓ Successful districts
    - ⇒ know that school improvement is a continuous process, and they can take the long view.
    - ⇒ can see the big picture, and take a holistic, integrative perspective on school improvement.
    - ⇒ operate from a primary commitment to local values.
    - ⇒ know the resources available to them, and communicate whenever necessary with their ESUs and NDE.
    - ⇒ know how to create mechanisms for widely shared ownership.
    - ⇒ know that administrators must be leaders of learning.

Recommendations for STARS:

- *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 process.*

## ***STATEWIDE WRITING ASSESSMENT***

### Findings:

- ✓ Teachers are well informed about the SWA, receiving information about it from a wide variety of sources.
- ✓ Teachers had ample professional development opportunities relating to the SWA.
- ✓ Teachers did little by way of preparing their students specifically for the SWA – primarily because they were doing Six Trait writing all year long.
- ✓ The majority of the **benefits** of the SWA are ascribed to Six Trait writing, while the majority of **challenges** and all of the **criticisms** of the SWA are ascribed to the test.
- ✓ Teachers perceive that the SWA brings a wide array of **benefits** for their **classroom work**, including the following:
  - ⇒ The SWA provides a common vocabulary to describe writing.
  - ⇒ The SWA encourages teachers to focus more of their instructional energy on writing.
  - ⇒ The SWA provides an additional piece of information about student learning.
  - ⇒ When coupled with other assessments, the SWA can help show growth or progress in student writing.
- ✓ Teachers also perceive that the SWA presents a wide array of **challenges** for their **classroom work**, including the following:
  - ⇒ Finding time, and room in the curriculum, for Six Trait writing is difficult.
  - ⇒ Fourth-grade teachers in particular are overwhelmed with assessment.
  - ⇒ The test is inconsistent with teaching writing as a process.
  - ⇒ In many districts, public misconceptions arise from holistic and comparative reporting of results.
- ✓ Teachers perceive that the SWA brings a wide array of **benefits** for **students**, including the following:
  - ⇒ Six Trait writing instruction improves student writing.
  - ⇒ Students learn through having available language to describe writing.
  - ⇒ Six Traits gives students a tool to self-reflect and evaluate their work.
  - ⇒ The examination gives students another opportunity to write.
- ✓ Teachers also perceive that the SWA presents a wide array of **challenges** for **students**, including the following:

- ⇒ The timeframe for the test is difficult for fourth-graders to negotiate.
- ⇒ Fourth graders have a difficult time with broad prompts and narrative writing.
- ⇒ The exam situation intimidates and frustrates fourth graders.
- ✓ Teachers report that Six Trait writing has led to profound improvements in classroom practice, but that the writing exam has not.
- ✓ Teachers report that the SWA has had some negative affects on school climate and teacher morale, but those effects have been negligible compared to those generated by other aspects of STARS. In fact, the SWA has, in some cases, improved school climate and boosted teacher morale.
- ✓ There is considerable confusion and dissatisfaction among teachers regarding the guidelines governing inclusion procedures for Special Education students and English Language Learners.
- ✓ Teachers do not perceive the SWA as providing meaningful or useful information to non-teachers.
- ✓ Teachers would like to see a number of changes made to the test and its reporting, including
  - ⇒ changes in the format of the test.
  - ⇒ changes in the timing of the test.
  - ⇒ changes in scoring/reporting.

### Recommendations

#### **Shorter-Term:**

- *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 bigger picture.*
- *Make minor format changes to the test.*
- *Offer the **option** of analytic scoring, or, failing that, offer assistance and resources to local districts that wish to score their own papers analytically.*
- *Help teachers and administrators put the test to local use.*

#### **Longer Term:**

- *Move toward a more complex, rigorous, and authentic writing assessment.*

## *LANGUAGE ARTS ASSESSMENT*

### *Findings*

- ✓ Many teachers are aligning curriculum and standards, and developing and scoring assessments, but few participate in the development of their District Assessment Portfolio.
- ✓ Teachers are more aware of and their instruction is more aligned with district assessments than with norm-referenced tests.
- ✓ Teachers believe district tests are better measures of what students know and can do than are norm-referenced tests.
- ✓ Teachers believe that district assessments are more instructionally useful than are norm-referenced tests.
- ✓ Teachers are devoting more instructional attention to writing and to other knowledge and skills that are being tested, but they report no other major shifts in instruction.
- ✓ Some teachers are concerned about the fairness of accommodations for Special Education students and, to an even greater extent, English Language Learners.
- ✓ Students are prepared for local tests via a variety of methods.
- ✓ The assessment process is improving communication between teachers and among teachers and students, and teachers are getting on “the same page.”
- ✓ Teachers are becoming more assessment literate, and are using assessment to guide instructional decision-making.
- ✓ Local assessments are useful tools for diagnosing students’ strengths and weaknesses.
- ✓ The majority of teachers, however, do not believe that district assessments are leading to school improvement.
- ✓ Most teachers believe that they can accurately judge student learning without the aid of district assessments.
- ✓ Many districts have not put an effective remediation system in place.
- ✓ Students who are either motivated or anxious when they take norm-referenced tests are also so when they take district tests.

### Recommendations

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

## **LEADERSHIP**

### ***I. State Leadership for School Improvement***

#### Findings

- ✓ The hallmark of NDE's leadership approach is a focus on building commitment, not exacting compliance.
- ✓ This approach is evident in several areas of NDE's work:
  - ⇒ vision-building
  - ⇒ involving local educators and administrators
  - ⇒ investing in professional development
  - ⇒ educating all stakeholders
  - ⇒ partnering with higher education
- ✓ NDE employs several *vision-building* leadership strategies:
  - ⇒ focusing first on "the why"
  - ⇒ soliciting others' visions and inviting dialogue
  - ⇒ keeping local values at the center
- ✓ NDE invites *involving local educators and administrators* in several sites:
  - ⇒ advisory committees composed largely of local educators and administrators
  - ⇒ forums designed expressly to solicit feedback
  - ⇒ interactive workshops and trainings
- ✓ NDE makes significant investment in three *tools for professional development*:
  - ⇒ expertise
  - ⇒ funding
  - ⇒ moral support
- ✓ NDE seeks to *educate all stakeholders*, including
  - ⇒ the media
  - ⇒ communities

- ✓ NDE has built *partnerships with higher education* through
  - ⇒ innovative teacher education programs
  - ⇒ Nebraska's P-16 Initiative
  - ⇒ research efforts

### **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, and perhaps especially parents, in STARS.*
- *Enhance involvement in teacher education.*

## II. Local Leadership for School Improvement

### **Findings**

- ✓ Staff support specialists, principals, and superintendents are the leaders of school improvement in most districts.
- ✓ Teachers and ESUs provide essential assistance to leaders.
- ✓ The majority of leaders have had formal education in school improvement, NDE trainings and workshops on school improvement, and "other" professional trainings and workshops on school improvement.
- ✓ Districts are at least somewhat satisfied with NDE's assistance on school improvement.
- ✓ STARS has improved leadership in most districts.
- ✓ Communicating with staff/faculty, organization, developing a district vision, and team-building are perceived to be the most important leadership skills for local school improvement leaders.
- ✓ Skills that relate to working with personnel are deemed most important, while others – such as paperwork, dealing with the state, or communicating with other districts – are rated less important.
- ✓ Respondents report favorably on their districts' school improvement plan (SIP):
  - ⇒ 97% report that their SIP is appropriate to their district;

- ⇒ 96% report that their SIP is consistent with Nebraska State Standards;
  - ⇒ 88% report that their SIP is “clear”;
  - ⇒ 86% report that their SIP is supported by teachers in their district;
  - ⇒ 80% report that their SIP is understood by teachers in their district;
  - ⇒ 84% report that their SIP is supported by the community in the district;
  - ⇒ 56% report that their SIP is understood by the community in the district.
- ✓ Time, ensuring professional development for teachers, data management, and resources are rated as the most severe challenges faced by districts in the school improvement process.
  - ✓ Of these, time is by far considered the most severe challenge.
  - ✓ Meeting state requirements and communicating with the state are serious concerns, but are not rated among the most severe challenges.
  - ✓ Like the most important skills, the most severe challenges are “in-house” concerns, and have mainly to do with working with personnel.

**Recommendations Regarding 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 constraints.*

***SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS***

- *Stay the Course.*
- *Carefully monitor pressure, especially with regard to time.*
- *Recognize, celebrate, and **reward** teachers’ professionalism.*
- *Focus on building teacher commitment.*
- *Focus on local values and local investment.*
- *Promote widely shared responsibility for STARS.*

- *Help districts and schools integrate STARS and school improvement.*
- *Enhance community engagement efforts.*
- *Enhance alliance with higher education beyond teacher education.*

## ***Chapter 1*** ***Introduction***

*[Traditionally – historically – Nebraska has always been above average. And that's just the mentality we have here.*  
--Nebraska teacher

Nebraska's educational situation is unique. It has more small schools and small classes (even in larger districts) than most states. Its students historically perform well above average on national assessments such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the ACT. Its teachers are generally well educated and extraordinarily committed to their profession. It harbors a deep commitment to local decision-making. Its Department of Education's renewal efforts are backed by strong legislative and policy support.

In recognition of these factors, the state has built a unique standards, assessment, and accountability system. During its 2000 session, the Nebraska Legislature passed LB812, which established guidelines and procedures for the state's School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS). The legislation required each district in the state to adopt measurable content standards in reading, writing, mathematics, science, social studies, and history. It also required districts to design local assessment programs and to begin reporting their results to NDE in AY 2000-2001. A statewide writing assessment was also mandated at this time.

The State Board of Education has since adopted content standards. Districts must either adopt these standards or create their own set of standards, which must be certified by the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) as at least as rigorous as the state's. The board also determined that Language Arts assessments (reading, speaking, and listening) would be reported in grades 4, 8, and 11 in 2000-2001, followed by Mathematics in 2001-2002.

In September of each year, each district submits an assessment plan to the state, and NDE provides feedback. District Assessment Portfolios, which include information on student performance on standards, as well as on the assessments used to measure that performance (including sample assessments), are submitted by the end of June of each academic year. These portfolios are reviewed and rated for both student performance and assessment quality by two groups of experts (more on this process in Chapter 2). These ratings become the basis for the State of the Schools Report, an exhaustive archive of information on school demographics and performance, available on NDE's website in both English and Spanish (see [www.nde.state.ne.us](http://www.nde.state.ne.us)). This information is also abstracted in the 2000-2001 Nebraska Report Card, which is widely disseminated in newspapers across the state.

STARS is set apart from other systems in the United States in that it

- ◆ comprises a statewide system of local assessments, rather than relying on a single state test;
- ◆ promotes a "balanced" approach to assessment, with multiple measures of student learning;

- ◆ places assessment design in the hands of teachers and local administrators;
- ◆ insists on equivalence without sameness, allowing flexibility in assessment and reporting;
- ◆ evaluates and rates both student achievement and assessment quality in each district;
- ◆ requires that assessments are aligned to standards, and that students have an opportunity to learn that which is assessed;
- ◆ allows for formative, classroom-based assessments to be used as a significant part of the reporting procedure to the state;
- ◆ aims to include *all* students in assessment and reporting;
- ◆ guides districts by identifying and highlighting model practices, and allows districts to adopt or adapt those practices in their own work;
- ◆ is portfolio-based: districts submit narratives and examples of their assessment work, and these are reviewed by panels of evaluators;
- ◆ refuses *high-stakes testing*, eschewing the popular punishment approach to school reform in favor of what we think of a *high-impact assessment*, which is both formative (instructionally useful) and summative (accountability-driven).

Also unique is the role NDE plays in STARS. Commissioner Christensen views NDE as a partner with local districts in school improvement. Staunchly supporting local decision-making and insisting that classroom instruction is at the center of school improvement, the Commissioner and his staff spend less time promoting compliance than fostering commitment to this vision and supporting district-level capacity-building efforts. In an era of top-down, high-stakes accountability, Christensen and his staff represent a new brand of educational leadership.

This highly original approach to standards, assessment, and accountability warrants special attention in the context of recent sweeping federal educational legislation. Indeed, other states are beginning to look to Nebraska as they respond to the requirements of the new No Child Left Behind Act. Like most states, Nebraska is not currently in compliance with some of the prospective federal mandates. Unlike other states, however, Nebraska is negotiating those requirements within its existing approach to standards, assessment, and accountability. As it does so, it is emerging as a national leader in assessment and accountability. To wit:

- ◆ Dr. Steve Joel, Superintendent of Grand Island Public Schools, reported in the August 27, 2001 *Lincoln Journal-Star* that commissioners of education across

the nation had responded very positively to Commissioner Christensen's presentation of the Nebraska model at a national meeting.

- ◆ Dr. Rick Stiggins, an assessment expert based in Portland, Oregon, announced in an October 2001 satellite broadcast to Nebraska educators and administrators that Nebraska is "leading the nation in assessment."
- ◆ In early 2002, the National Council on Measurement in Education recognized the University of Nebraska - Lincoln's "Assessment Cohort Program," an 18-hour graduate specialization in assessment literacy and the first of its kind in the nation, with a national award for excellence in teacher preparation.

### *The Study*

Contracted as a multiyear, independent evaluation of STARS, this study is conducted under the auspices of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Teachers College Institute (TCI), an organization designed to facilitate multidisciplinary research and outreach collaborations in service of school improvement and innovation. The study also receives support from UNL's College of Arts and Sciences. Dr. Chris Gallagher, Assistant Professor of English, serves as Coordinator and Principal Investigator. Dr. Deborah Bandalos, Associate Professor of Educational Psychology and Director of UNL's Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Education Program, served as Co-Principal Investigator during Year One. Secondary Researchers included graduate students Jeannine Nyangira and Katie Stahlnecker (English), and Andrea Hicks and Kristin Job (Teachers College).

The principal audience for this report is Commissioner Douglas Christensen and the Nebraska Department of Education, who have commissioned the study. At the same time, it is intended to be useful to multiple audiences, including teachers, teacher educators, policymakers, ESU staff, and other educational stakeholders. Therefore, while we draw on the results of a wealth of qualitative and quantitative research, as well as analysis of STARS-related documents, we have endeavored to do so in non-technical, jargon-free prose.

The primary goal of the study is *to determine the effectiveness of Nebraska's unique approach to standards, assessment, and accountability*. Our aims during the first year of the project were to develop a conceptual framework; design and administer a set of research instruments that would yield solid, representative baseline data; analyze a variety of STARS-related documents (including meeting notes, workshop materials, broadcasts, STARS updates, media coverage, correspondence from NDE to districts, etc.); and generate a Year One Report that reports on findings so far and maps out a plan for further research. In consultation with two advisory groups – one consisting of school improvement staff at NDE and the other consisting of English Department and Teachers College faculty at UNL – we decided to organize the study into four sections:

- 1) The District Assessment Portfolio (DAP) Process [facilitated by Gallagher]
- 2) The Statewide Writing Assessment (SWA) [facilitated by Gallagher]

- 3) Language Arts Assessments [facilitated by Bandalos]<sup>1</sup>
- 4) Leadership for School Improvement [facilitated by Gallagher]

For each section, we developed a set of research questions; these are indicated at the beginning of the respective chapters. Overall, we were interested in

- ◆ perceived benefits and challenges of STARS;
- ◆ “assessment literacy” among Nebraska teachers and administrators;
- ◆ leadership requirements and demands posed by STARS;
- ◆ effects of STARS on classroom practice;
- ◆ effects of STARS on school climate; and
- ◆ student inclusion and accommodation issues.

With these broad issues in mind, we designed multiple quantitative and qualitative research instruments; selected districts using random sampling and stratified sampling techniques; secured Institutional Review Board approval for all pieces of the study (#2001-12-108EX; see Appendix A); collected and examined STARS-related documents; and conducted field research. The research design, findings, and conclusions and recommendations for each section of the study are described in the respective chapters.

### *Guiding Principles*

As those outside Nebraska continue to pay closer attention to STARS, it is the task of this study to examine it from the inside, as it were – from the perspective of those “in the field” who are charged with the responsibility of enacting it. This points to our first guiding principle:

- ◆ *The study must give voice to those who are enacting the system.* A “school-based, teacher-led” system can be successful only to the extent that teachers and school administrators actively participate in developing and enacting it. One of our most important tasks is to collect and represent voices “from the field.”

At the same time, NDE has contracted an independent evaluation, and so:

- ◆ *The study must dispassionately and rigorously evaluate both the strengths and the limitations of STARS.* Like school districts, and like students, NDE needs a reliable, candid assessment of what it is doing well, as well as what (and how) it can improve. We have assembled a team of researchers with no personal or professional stake in the results of the study. All of the principal and secondary investigators are University of Nebraska-Lincoln faculty or staff, and their services for this project are contracted by Teachers College Institute.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 4 includes results of a survey sent to language arts teachers across the state. Researchers also conducted a series of interviews with teachers. Results of these interviews will be incorporated into our Year Two Report.

Finally, we have adopted three principles regarding how the research should unfold:

- ◆ *The study must have multiple stages.* Just as STARS continues to evolve, so must this study. We are aware that some of the most important information we will collect can only be viewed accurately over time; this first year, then, has been dedicated to generating baseline data and a blueprint for further research.
- ◆ *The study must cast a wide but carefully targeted research net.* We need to keep Nebraska's unique demographics in mind as we select study participants. Where appropriate, we must generate broadly representative data, but at times, we will also need to target specific populations for inclusion. In our Statewide Writing Assessment section, for instance, we aimed to generate a random sample of fourth-grade teachers across the state, while we decided to confine our research on District Assessment Portfolios to districts receiving "exemplary" ratings.
- ◆ *The study must employ multiple research methods.* Because we are targeting different populations and looking for different kinds of information, we need to develop multiple research instruments. During this first year, we have combined quantitative research (surveys), qualitative research (interviews and observational research), and discourse analysis (examination of artifacts generated by STARS). This seems appropriate: a system that encourages multiple measures requires an evaluation that employs multiple measures.

These principles have guided our work. In turn, we hope our work will prove a helpful guide to Nebraska's teachers, administrators, policymakers, and others who are embarked on this unique journey.

### Works Cited

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Stiggins, Richard. "The World is Watching." Satellite Broadcast Presentation. 8 October 2001.

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 Nebraska, Lincoln, NE, 68588-0333

## *Chapter 2*

### *District Assessment Portfolio System*

In Nebraska's assessment and accountability system, districts are rated not only on their students' performance, but also on the quality of the assessments they use to measure that performance. By June 30 each year, districts must submit to the state a District Assessment Portfolio (DAP) for each grade level. The major components of DAPs include:

- ◆ a district assessment description;
- ◆ a description of how assessments meet six Quality Criteria (QC);
- ◆ a sample of assessments; and
- ◆ assessments that the district considers exemplary and documentation of how these assessments meet six QC (optional)

The DAPs go through a two-step review process. First, a panel of 8 assessment experts examines the portfolios, assists in the training of reviewers, and determines model assessments. Then a group of 16 reviewers rates the portfolio according to a rubric established by the Buros Institute for Testing, which oversees the reviewing and rating process. The reviewers determine whether each QC is "met," "met-needs improvement," or "not met." The QC are as follows:

- 1) Assessments reflect state or local standards.
- 2) Students have an opportunity to learn the content.
- 3) The assessments are free from bias or offensive language or situations.
- 4) The level is appropriate for students.
- 5) There is consistency in scoring (reliability).
- 6) Mastery levels are appropriate.

Districts have several options to document that they have satisfied each criterion. For Criterion 2, for instance, the following methods may be used to ensure that students have had an opportunity to learn the content assessed:

- ◆ Representative panels of qualified teachers have examined the curriculum to determine that students have had the opportunity to learn the content of the assessment prior to being assessed.
- ◆ All grade/content teachers were surveyed to determine where the assessment content is addressed in lesson plans.
- ◆ Panels of teachers or administrators have collected and examined samples of classroom assessments to determine that the assessment content was taught prior to assessment.

- ◆ Panels of teachers or administrators have examined or collected lesson plans to determine that the assessment content was taught prior to assessment.
- ◆ Peer teachers or administrators conducted classroom observations to determine that the assessment content was taught prior to assessment.
- ◆ Some other method was used to determine that students had the opportunity to learn the content prior to their being assessed.

Similarly, for Criterion 3, districts may choose among the following methods for ensuring that assessments are free from bias or offensive situations:

- ◆ The assessment writers have participated in an orientation regarding test bias.
- ◆ A panel of qualified educators or others representing various socio-economic and ethnic groups has reviewed drafts of the assessment.
- ◆ A statistical analysis of the assessments was conducted to verify that items on the test do not demonstrate statistical bias.
- ◆ Some other method was used to assess freedom from bias.

Each grade-level DAP is examined by reviewers, who determine whether the description of the process for meeting the criteria is complete and whether the district provides sufficient evidence that the criteria have indeed been satisfied.

To our knowledge, this evaluation is more rigorous than that of any other state. Many states, in fact, continue to use norm-referenced assessments that do not match their own standards, and we know of no state that conducts such a thorough evaluation of opportunity to learn. In the Nebraska system, these two criteria must be met even to receive a poor rating.

Given the rigor and thoroughness of the evaluation process, and considering that this was the first year for the DAP process, the results from AY2000-2001 were promising. Five hundred and twenty-one (521) districts (176 working in consortia and 345 working independently) submitted 1,115 grade level portfolios (grades 4, 8, and 11). Of the portfolios reviewed,

- ◆ 15% received an “exemplary” rating;
- ◆ 50% were rated “very good”;
- ◆ 4% were rated “good,”
- ◆ 29% were rated “acceptable, but needs improvement,” and
- ◆ 8% were rated “unacceptable.”

In terms of student performance,

- ◆ 26% of grade-level portfolios fell in the “exemplary” performance range;
- ◆ 34% fell in the “very good” performance range;

- ◆ 17% fell in the “good” performance range;
- ◆ 6% fell in the “acceptable, but needs improvement” performance range;
- ◆ 17% fell in the “unacceptable” performance range.

Thirty-four (34) districts were recognized for *exemplary* assessment ratings and *exemplary* performance ratings in one or more grade levels, and 33 additional districts received *exemplary* assessment ratings and *very good* performance ratings.

Because our aim for this section of the study was to learn about districts that had been successful in this new system, we designed a survey and conducted interviews in these “honor roll” districts (see Appendix C for copies of research instruments). Among our research questions were these:

- ◆ What process did successful districts go through to develop and assemble their DAP?
- ◆ What did this work make possible in their district?
- ◆ How will they use the information generated from the DAP in their ongoing school improvement efforts?

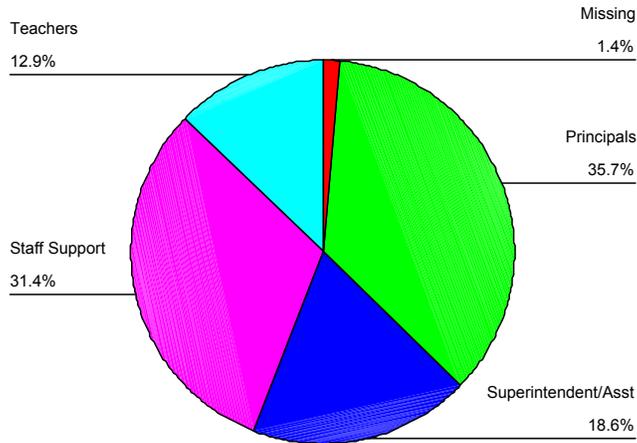
The survey results are at once broader and narrower than the interview results. They are broader in the sense that we received information from more respondents in a larger number of districts, but narrower in the sense that they focus more closely than the interviews on the DAP itself, rather than the STARS system more generally. Together, the two sets of information provide a useful portrait of how successful districts perceived and participated in the DAP process.

## **I. The Survey**

### **Research Design**

We sent 85 surveys to assessment contacts and/or superintendents in each district receiving at least one exemplary rating (with the exception of Omaha Public Schools, which declined to be included in our study). Seventy (70) surveys were returned, for a return rate of 82%. Of these, 25 were returned by principals, 13 by superintendents or associate/assistant superintendents, 21 by staff support personnel (assessment coordinators, curriculum directors, staff developers, etc.), and 9 by teachers. One respondent did not identify a primary position. Figure 1 represents the percentages in each category.

**Figure 1. The Respondents**



Respondents had an average of almost 24 years of educational experience, and had attended an average of 10 assessment-related workshops. Thirteen had earned their doctorate; 31 had earned a Masters degree; the rest had earned a Bachelor's degree, a specialist degree, or both.

Although our sample is small and confined to districts earning exemplary ratings, our respondents are diverse in terms of geographic area and district size. They represent 43 different counties and 14 Educational Service Units across the state. Their districts have anywhere from a handful to more than 31,000 students. Of those reporting district size, the numbers break down like this:

Fewer than 500 students	40 (60%)
501-1,000 students	10 (15%)
1,001-5,000 students	9 (13%)
More than 5,000 students	8 (12%)

(Throughout this report, percentages are rounded to the nearest full percent, and may not always equal 100.)

The survey focuses closely on the portfolio itself – its conceptualization, organization, and assembly. It includes twenty-one statements, each accompanied by a response scale: Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neutral (N), Agree (A), and Strongly Agree (SA). Survey results were coded into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), and descriptive statistics were run by the Nebraska Evaluation and Research (NEAR) Center. Results were analyzed by Gallagher.

## Findings

We have organized the results of the survey into four categories:

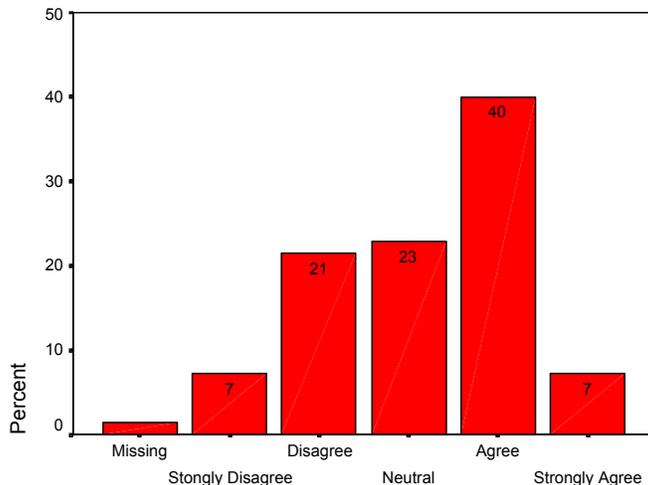
- ◆ State Expectations for the DAP (Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 16)
- ◆ DAP Assembly Process (Questions 5, 6, 9, 8, 10, 11, 14, 15)
- ◆ Outcomes of DAP (Questions 12, 17, 19, 20, 21)
- ◆ Recommendations for the DAP System (Questions 13, 18)

### State Expectations

- *Most districts find the DAP directions clear.*
- *Most districts find the timeline for the DAP extremely challenging.*
- *The components of the DAP are generally viewed as appropriate.*
- *The rating procedure is generally perceived as fair.*

A vast majority of respondents (70%) reported no difficulty with the clarity of the directions provided by NDE for assembly of the DAP (Q1). In fact only 21% *disagreed*, and 7% *strongly disagreed*, with the statement, “The directions provided for the assembly of the DAP were clear.” We would anticipate that those latter numbers will become even lower as districts become accustomed to using this new system.

**Figure 2. The DAP directions were clear.**



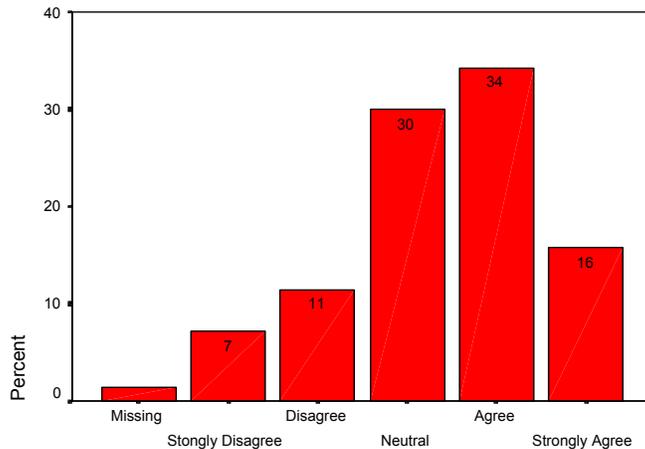
Q1

On the other hand, less than half of the respondents (47%) believed that the timeline for the DAP was manageable (Q2). An almost equal percentage (44%) reported

that the timeline was not manageable. This concern about time is clearly echoed in other sections of this report, and is worth tracking as users learn the DAP system.

Most respondents believed that the components of the DAP are appropriate. The majority (60%), first of all, thought that including information on the district's demographics and features is an important component of the DAP, while only 13% did not think so (Q3). Fifty percent (50%) thought that the six Quality Criteria (QC) – the backbone of the evaluation mechanism – are good indicators of assessment process quality, 30% were noncommittal, and only 18% thought that the QC were not good indicators (Q4; Figure 3).

**Figure 3. The six quality criteria are good indicators of the quality of my district's assessment process.**

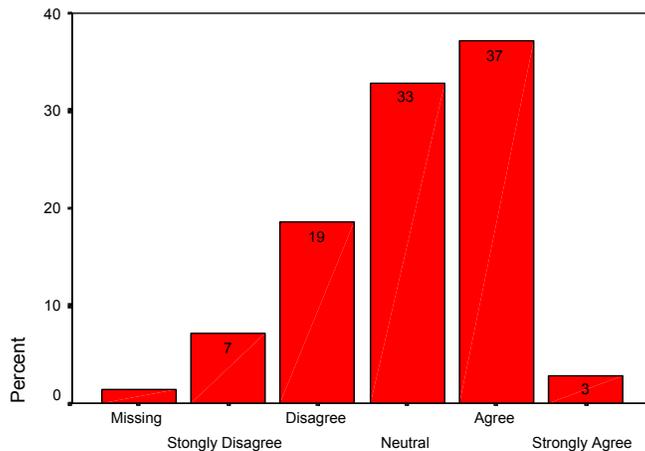


Q4

Moreover, respondents did not believe that the six Quality Criteria should be weighted equally (Q7) – a sentiment that is in line with the rating system, which weights criteria 1 (match to standards) and 2 (opportunity to learn) more heavily than the others. Indeed, less than 25% believed the criteria should be weighted equally. (A similar percentage was neutral on this question.)

Finally, most respondents perceived the rating system for the DAP to be fair (Q16). As Figure 4 shows, the results are mixed, but only roughly one-quarter of respondents *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* that the rating system is fair. The large number of *neutrals* likely suggests that many respondents are withholding judgment, for now, on the fairness of the rating system.

**Figure 4. The DAP rating system is fair.**



Q16

In sum, respondents are fairly comfortable with the state’s expectations for the DAP – though the timeline in particular is a challenge.

DAP Assembly Process

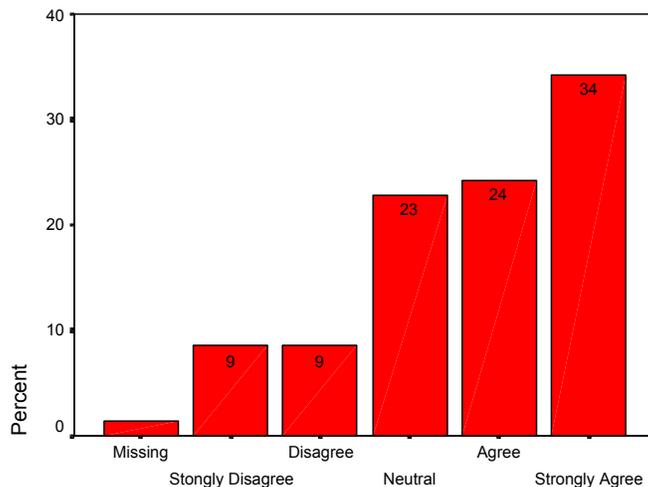
- *DAP assembly typically did not promote teamwork or provide opportunities for staff to learn.*
- *There is widespread agreement that smaller districts are at a disadvantage in assembling a DAP.*
- *Most districts are receiving helpful assistance from their ESUs, and many anticipate that Mathematics assessment and reporting will be easier than Language Arts.*
- *The DAP is generally considered an accurate reflection of districts’ assessment practices, but not of districts’ best work.*

Only 41% of respondents reported that assembly of the DAP promoted teamwork in their district (Q9). Thirty-four percent (34%) reported that it did not, and 25% answered *neutral*. These numbers are perhaps surprising, given NDE’s emphasis on learning teams. It is not clear, however, whether respondents were considering only the physical assembly of the portfolio, or the entire process. This is also the case when only 51% of respondents reported that assembly of the DAP provided learning opportunities for staff in their district (Q6). Further research will be necessary to determine whether, in fact, the entire DAP *process* – conceptualizing, writing, compiling, revising, etc. – is promoting teamwork in a large number of districts, as it is in some of the districts we focus on in the interviews section below. What seems clear, at any rate, is that in a large percentage of

districts, the DAP becomes, at one point or another, the responsibility of individuals, rather than teams of individuals.

Another clear message sent by respondents is that larger districts have an advantage over smaller districts in assembling a DAP (Q10; Figure 5). The largest category of response here is *strongly agree* (34%), followed by *agree* (24%) and *neutral* (23%). Only 18% *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with this statement. This issue reemerges in Chapter 5, with some smaller districts complaining that their funding and human resources are inadequate to meet the demands of school improvement. This may be an important piece of information for NDE to consider as it plans its DAP workshops and trainings in coming years.

**Figure 5. Larger districts have an advantage over smaller districts in assembling a DAP.**

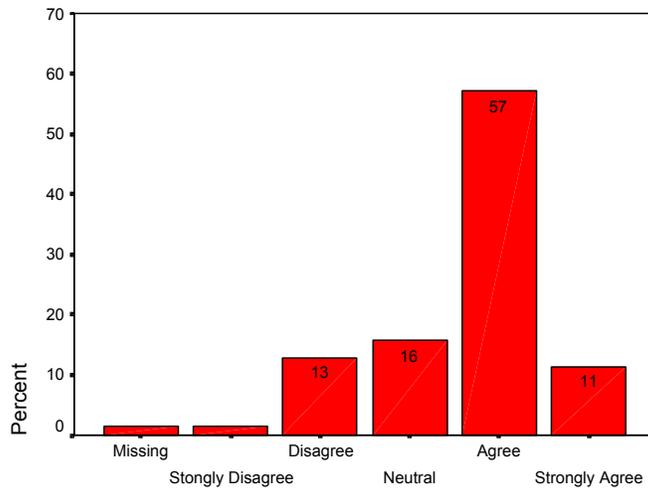


Q10

On the other hand, small and large districts alike – 72% of respondents – reported receiving helpful assistance from their ESUs. Moreover, the majority (55%) believed that their DAP for Mathematics (AY 2002-2003) – which were well underway at most districts at the time of the survey – would be easier than their Language Arts DAP (AY 2001-2002). These responses suggest that districts are receiving significant help and anticipate a somewhat easier road ahead. (In fact, less than 28% of respondents *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with this prediction.)

Another positive piece of information is that the majority of respondents (68%) believed that the DAP accurately represents their districts' assessment work (Q5; Figure 6). Indeed, only 15% told us that this is not the case. This is strong evidence that the DAP is an accurate representational tool.

**Figure 6. The DAP is an accurate representation of my district’s assessment process.**



Q5

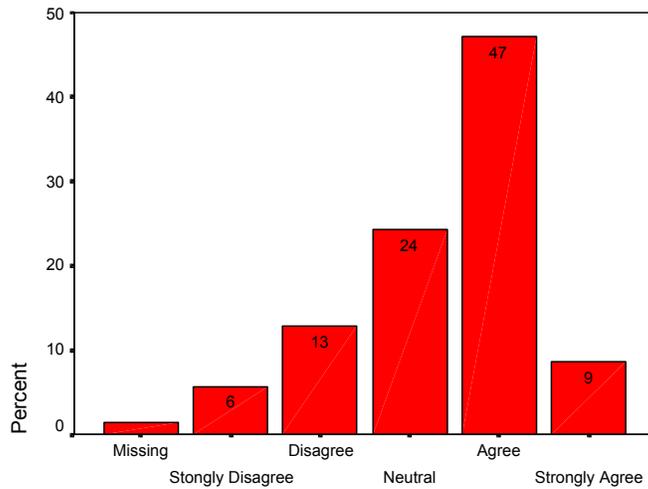
On the other hand, respondents by and large did not report that the DAP reflects their district’s best work (Q8). In fact, 39% reported that the DAP does not reflect their district’s best work, 13% are *neutral*, and less than half (48%) think it does. So while respondents believed the DAP accurately represents local assessment processes, many also believed that there is room for improvement in those processes. This leads us to the next category.

#### Outcomes of DAP

- *The DAP is serving as a diagnostic tool as districts evaluate their assessment practices.*
- *Most districts view the feedback they received from their evaluation as useful, and anticipate changes to their DAP and, even more so, to their assessment practices.*

One outcome the DAP process has already produced, it seems, is this recognition that there is room for improvement in district assessment processes. In other words, because the DAP accurately represents assessment practices, it serves as a tool for diagnosing how to improve those practices. Indeed, respondents were generally confident that the information provided by the DAP would result in further changes, both in how they approach the DAP and how they conduct assessment. Fifty-six percent (56%) reported that the feedback they received from the state’s evaluation of their DAP “will be helpful,” while only 19% believed that this was not the case (Q17; Figure 7). It should also be noted that a large percentage – almost one-quarter – answered *neutral* to this question, which may suggest that they were not sure yet how to evaluate the feedback they received (or were not aware of it).

**Figure 7. The feedback my district received from the evaluation will be helpful.**



Q17

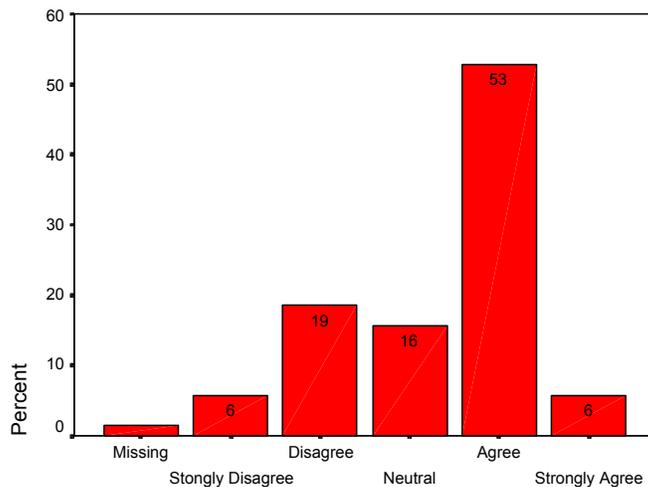
Respondents generally anticipated that their work on the DAP will change next year:

- ◆ 48% anticipated changes in how the DAP is *conceptualized*; 28% did not (Q19);
- ◆ 39% anticipated changes in how the DAP is *organized*; 38% did not (Q20);
- ◆ 54% anticipated changes in how their DAP is *communicated*; 26% did not (Q21).

For each of these questions, one-fifth to one-quarter of respondents answered *neutral*, suggesting that many participants do not know whether changes will be instituted.

As for assessment practices themselves, most respondents (59%) predicted changes in assessment practices, while only one-quarter anticipated no changes (Figure 8). Again, we see a sizable number of *neutral* responses, suggesting that respondents were not sure whether to anticipate changes to assessment practice in their district.

**Figure 8. The DAP will change assessment practice in my district.**



Q12

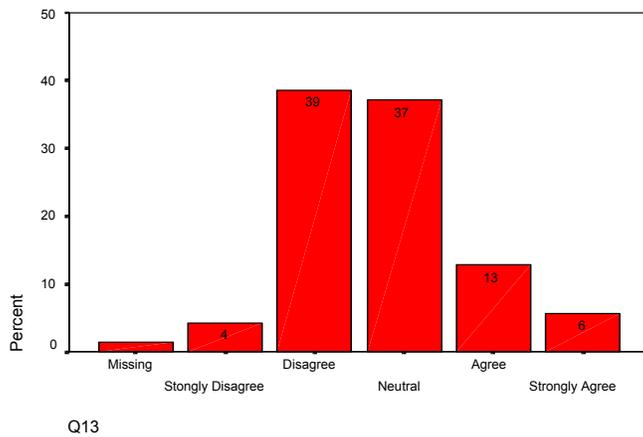
On the whole, we can see that more respondents anticipated changes to both their DAP and their assessment practices than did not. When we consider that our sample included only districts that received exemplary ratings, these numbers are reassuringly high; few, it seems, are willing to “rest on their laurels.”

Respondents’ Recommendations for DAP System

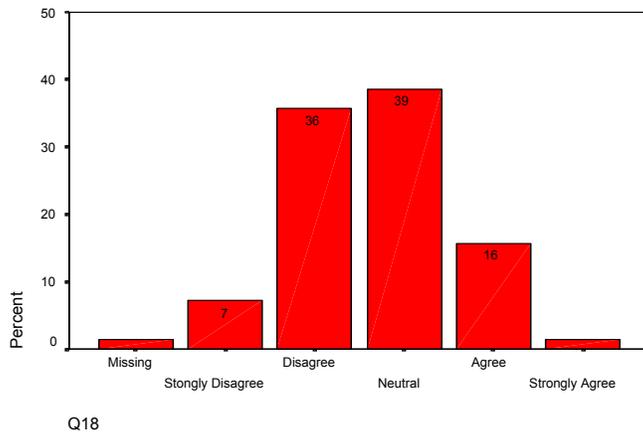
- *There is little sentiment for undertaking major changes to the DAP or to replacing it altogether.*

Finally, we asked two questions designed to solicit advice on the DAP system as a whole. We asked whether or not the DAP should undergo major changes next year (Q13), and whether or not it should be replaced with a different evaluation method altogether (Q18). Only 19% believed that the DAP should undergo major changes next year, while 43% did not think so, and 37% were *neutral* (Figure 9). Similarly, only 17% thought that the DAP should be replaced altogether, while 43% did not think so, and 39% were *neutral* (Figure 10). Again, these results suggest that most respondents either support the DAP process or are willing to reserve judgment on it.

**Figure 9. The DAP should undergo major changes this next year.**



**Figure 10. The DAP should be replaced with a different method.**

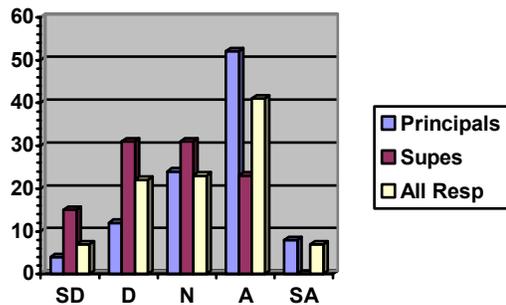


*Findings by Size, Region, and Position*

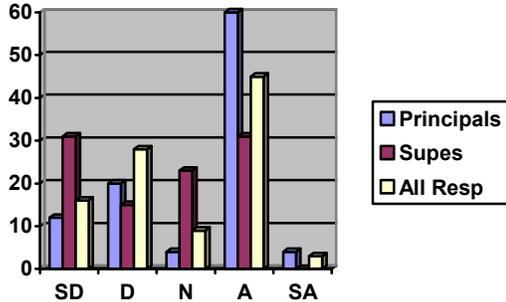
When we broke each item down according to size and region of district, we found no relationships. In other words, we found no evidence to suggest that a district's size or location affected how the respondents answered any of the questions.

The one interesting relationship we did find has to do with the respondent's position. On the whole, principals responded more positively to the DAP system, while superintendents tended to respond more negatively. We see these trends in responses to each question, but the following charts, which break down answers by principals, superintendents, and all respondents, are sufficient to demonstrate them:

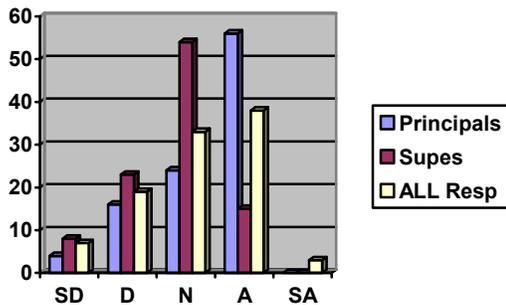
**Q1. The directions provided for the assembly of the DAP were clear.**



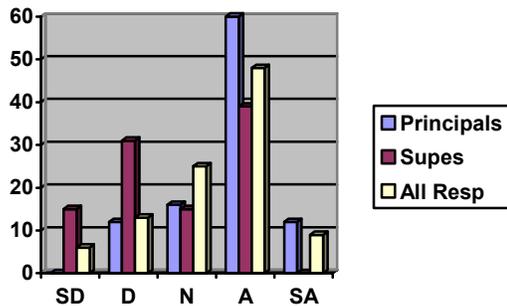
**Q2. The timeline for the DAP was manageable.**



**Q16. The DAP rating system is fair.**



**Q17. The feedback my district received from the evaluation will be helpful.**



As we see, superintendents consistently responded more negatively to the DAP system, and principals consistently responded more positively, than did respondents in other categories. Further research would be necessary to determine whether or not these findings can be generalized, and if so, what accounts for these differences.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

It is important to remember that respondents were reporting on their first year using the DAP system. This may help to account for the concerns about the timeline for the DAP. On the other hand, it may also help explain why so many respondents seem to be taking a “wait and see” attitude, reserving judgment on the DAP system.

We do see some evidence that the DAP is supporting districts in examining and developing their local assessment systems. Even in these successful districts, respondents anticipated changes to the DAP as well as local assessment practice.

What is not clear from this survey is how the entire DAP process – from initial conceptualization through final assembly – plays out. The interviews, reported below, provide much richer information on this.

In the meantime, we offer the following recommendations with regard to the DAP system:

- 1) *For the present, keep the DAP substantially the same.* As we indicate elsewhere in this report, there is considerable sentiment *not* to change Nebraska’s assessment and accountability system in significant ways, at least for the time being. Here, it seems clear that the majority of respondents are willing to see what the DAP will bring, and in the meantime, are participating in it in good faith. They also agree that the major components of the DAP are appropriate, and that the rating system is fair.
- 2) *Build support for the DAP as a school improvement tool, not a compliance document.* We suspect one of the chief reasons these districts have been successful is that they generally support, or are willing participants in, the DAP system. As we will see in the interview section, districts tend to perform well when the system is *locally meaningful*, when they see the “payoff” for their work locally. One way

for NDE to build support for the DAP would be to offer workshops and trainings designed specifically to help districts integrate the DAP into their local vision so that it becomes an integral part of ongoing school improvement and also provides regular learning opportunities for staff.

- 3) *Help districts manage the DAP timeline.* If, as many respondents suspect, the DAP will become more manageable over time, and especially as districts return to Language Arts and Mathematics, challenges posed by time constraints may be alleviated. But this is yet to be seen. In the meantime, NDE can help districts with time management by providing models of how successful districts developed their DAPs. Our impression is that successful districts start earlier, work more steadily at STARS, and find ways to fold this work into their larger school improvement process. NDE can make sample timelines available, or even create a handbook of time-saving practices.
- 4) *Provide special assistance for DAP assembly to smaller schools.* More research will uncover the reasons for the widespread perception that smaller districts are at a disadvantage in the DAP system. However, informal research would suggest that many smaller districts lack – or perceive that they lack – the technical expertise and resources for staff support personnel that are common in larger districts. Representatives from smaller schools also report less available flexibility in staffing, as all staff already perform multiple functions. NDE could earmark special funds for smaller schools, and/or run regional workshops specifically designed to help smaller schools with their particular challenges.

## II. The Interviews

### Research Design

To supplement the data provided by the survey, we gathered information that was both more specific (how did districts actually do their assessment and reporting work?), and more general (what did the entire STARS process, not just the DAP assembly, look like?). In February and March 2002, we conducted nine interviews in five districts. We interviewed fourteen teachers, three administrators, and one director of learning services. Of those reporting years of education and highest degree earned (14 respondents), interviewees averaged 17 years in education and most (9) had earned at least a Masters degree (one had earned a specialist degree and the others had earned their Bachelors).

Like those in the survey, districts were chosen from the “honor roll” of districts. Although our sample was small, we aimed for a range of school sizes and geographic locations.

**District 1** is a large district in the eastern part of the state with 7,868 students. One interview: four teachers.

**District 2** is a small district in the central part of the state with 490 students. It participated in STARS as part of a consortium of approximately ten school districts. One interview: two teachers.

**District 3** is a medium-sized district in the western part of the state with 1,821 students. It participated in STARS as part of a consortium of 63 school districts. Three interviews: one director of learning services; one principal; one teacher.

**District 4** is a small district in the western part of the state with 80 students (k-8). It participated in STARS as part of a rural consortium of six school districts. Two interviews: three teachers; one administrator.

**District 5** is a small district in the northern part of the state with 157 students. Two interviews: one administrator; four teachers.

(Numbers of students based on NDE 2000-01 reports.)

Interviewees were selected by the superintendent or assessment contact in each participating district. Participants were informed by the field researcher that

- ◆ they were being asked to participate in an independent research and evaluation project run out of the University of Nebraska;
- ◆ their names and schools would be known only to the researchers, and they would not be identified in any research reports or other writing produced by the researchers;
- ◆ they had the right to refuse participation or withdraw from the project at any time;
- ◆ they had the right to request copies of research results; and
- ◆ their relationship with NDE and UNL would not be adversely affected by their participation, or by withholding participation, in this study.

Some interviews were conducted in a focus group format, while others were individual (depending on availability and preferences of participants). All interviews were tape recorded with permission of the participants, and transcriptions were sent to each interviewee for data verification. Interviews lasted between one and two hours.

Interview transcripts were analyzed several times for patterns and themes. Dr. Gallagher coded participants' statements according to several key categories, which were developed in consultation with the field researchers and through multiple readings of the transcripts:

- 1) Perceived Benefits of STARS
- 2) Perceived Challenges Posed by STARS
- 3) Criticism of STARS
- 4) Suggestions for STARS

These categories guided Gallagher's drafting of the report. Next, Gallagher consulted the field researchers to ensure accuracy and completeness, and then, with their advice, revised the report into its current form.

### Findings

Themes emerging in these interviews reinforce and extend those that surfaced in e-mail feedback solicited by Commissioner Christensen during fall 2001. In response to a request from Dr. Christensen, approximately fifty teachers and administrators from around the state identified several areas of concern regarding STARS. Dr. Christensen, Sharon Meyer (Administrator School Improvement and Accreditation), and Pat Roschewski (Coordinator of Statewide Assessment) extracted and responded to the following "issues" from this set of responses:

- ◆ "Nebraska students do well, so why are we doing state assessment and reporting?"
- ◆ "I'm so busy assessing my students that I do not have time to teach them."
- ◆ "This process is unfair to certain teachers (especially 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers), and is a burden."
- ◆ "There's too much paperwork with all the assessment and data management."
- ◆ "Assessment and reporting is [sic] driving good teachers out of the teaching profession."

In a follow-up email (sent February 14, 2002), Christensen, Meyer, and Roschewski also identified several positive comments from the solicited responses:

- ◆ "This is an excellent model for project-based learning."
- ◆ "The classroom and school-based texts are very student friendly."
- ◆ "Our district has worked together to discuss and complete a more thorough k-12 curriculum."
- ◆ "We are learning as we go."
- ◆ "I strongly believe we are doing the right thing for our students."

The positive *and* negative responses articulated in this exchange were shared by teachers and administrators in our study. Participants clearly echoed the email transcript, for instance, in their concerns about the pace of the process, and they strongly endorsed the state's decision to slow down the reporting process by returning to Language Arts and Mathematics before moving to Science and Social Studies.

Our research also enhances themes in the email exchange. For instance, some issues that show up in the email transcripts but did not receive much attention from the NDE representatives – namely, teachers’ expertise, guidance from the state, fears about uses of results, and the reliability of the state’s local control process – turn out to be of serious concern to our participants. On the other side of the coin, our research also generates a much more nuanced portrait than does the email exchange of what practitioners perceive to be the strengths and benefits of STARS.

### Perceived Benefits of STARS

Most interviewees, even those who are critical overall, found much to recommend STARS. They identified the following as benefits of the system:

- 1) *STARS honors the good professional work teachers are already doing.* A number of participants praised the state’s local control system for valuing their professional expertise. As one teacher put it, “Doug Christensen[’s philosophy] is really the same thing that we believe as teachers. It’s th[e] philosophy that assessment should drive instruction. The way we teach should be what we get from our assessments.” Another teacher noted that a teacher-led system is especially appropriate for Nebraska: “[T]raditionally – historically – Nebraska has always been above average. And that’s just the mentality we have here.” Likewise, a principal in another district lauded STARS because “it validates the professionalism of our teachers.”
- 2) *STARS provides impetus for developing new visions of k-12 education and collegiality across grade levels.* Many participants used the word “integration” to describe their work on STARS. One teacher, for instance, described the following as a district goal: “the vertical integration of all of our subjects from k through 12.” Participants also told us that STARS puts positive pressure on them to work as a team. This seems especially important for fourth-grade teachers; as one fourth-grade teacher put it, “I find it really comforting to know that someone else has ownership in [assessment].”
- 3) *STARS helps teachers and administrators examine their curriculum critically, identifying gaps, enhancing strengths, and improving responsiveness to students.* Many participants praised the flexibility of STARS, noting that changes in student populations require agile thinking on the part of educators. As one participant indicated, “[STARS] does truly individualize the instruction for students.” Administrators and educators alike noted that critical scrutiny of their curriculum has revealed both gaps and overlaps. They welcomed the guidance of standards as a lens on local practice: “It has made us a lot more aware of what the standards are, how to measure them appropriately, and how to use the information from that measurement to plan for what this child needs in instruction.” Even the harshest critic of STARS in our study admitted that “we found a couple of areas where we found that we wanted to do better... Anytime you have to sit and look at what you’re doing from a different viewpoint, it’s good.”

- 4) *STARS promotes teachers' professional growth, especially in the area of assessment literacy.* Several participants reported that STARS supports their own learning, and promotes their sense of efficacy. A teacher singled out Rick Stiggins' training because "[I]t helped demystify [assessment] for the students, parents, community, teachers, [and] administrators." But a principal pointed out that the whole STARS process sponsors teachers' professional development: "[I]t allows the practitioners in the field to understand their product better and...[to grow] professionally. I think there's...a significant amount of validation for professional educators [in that process]." In fact, this principal noted, "the part of our staff that has been involved in the assessment process has become more energized." An ESU staff developer agreed: "[Teachers] are becoming so knowledgeable about the data analysis process that they're able to look back and see which standards they need to address again." Teachers are also improving their assessments; one teacher reported that her district is actually testing less now than in the past, as a result of eliminating ineffective and sometimes redundant tests. Another reported that "it's more beneficial for me to assess the way I do now than I was last year, because I know how to use it or what to do with it."
- 5) *STARS sponsors positive changes in classroom practice.* It is worth quoting a teacher at length on this point:

[W]e wouldn't be teachers if we didn't know how to teach. But actually breaking things apart and really using effective strategies, I think, is the key when you're teaching...And that might not have been a real strength for some teachers, and now we're putting it as a part of the assessments – as part of the practice – to prepare kids...we're making it part of our whole school, that process where teachers really are learning the best practices and implementing them into their classrooms.

In some cases, working with STARS has led to innovative teaching practices; one teacher, for instance, reported that a colleague is doing "a wonderful job" integrating Language Arts and Science through a project approach. Also, several teachers noted that students are responding well to changes brought about by increased attention to assessment. Sharing assessment language with students, for instance, helps them know what is valued in the classroom: "it's a lot easier for the kids because you can give them a copy of the rubric and say, 'Okay, these are the things I'm looking for.' And they know. They know that target, and it's easier for them to hit it." A teacher in another district added that increased attention to assessment also helps students "to take responsibility for their own learning...to become learners themselves."

- 6) *STARS helps educators communicate with their local constituencies.* Although only a few participants mentioned this point, they stressed the value of using the information provided by assessment and reporting as discussion starters with local stakeholders, including parents, and also local groups and organizations with an interest in education. As one teacher framed it, "[We are saying] 'This is our philosophy. This

is what we believe assessment is about.’ And getting that information to parents and to our schools, administrators, teachers, and the students themselves....”

### Perceived Challenges Posed By STARS

While many participants offered positive appraisals of STARS, almost all spoke at length about the serious challenges posed by the system:

- 1) *STARS requires a great deal of time.* Teachers and administrators alike noted the significant time commitment required to align curriculum to standards, as well as create, administer, and report assessments. Many teachers are sacrificing their summers, evening time, and weekends to participate in this process. One teacher reported that for those who worked most intensely on STARS, “it robbed them of their home life.” Few participants actually kept track of how much time putting the DAP together took, but a district staff developer who did keep books on “man hours” reported that 326 hours of teachers’ and administrators’ time was devoted to DAP development. Reports of the DAP process in other districts would suggest that this is not an unusual commitment, and other sections of this report reinforce this concern with time.
- 2) *The tasks required by STARS sometimes seem overwhelming.* Several teachers reported that they didn’t know where to begin with the process of assessment; the job seemed too large to conceptualize. A couple participants worried that the amount and complexity of work required by STARS would frustrate and perhaps drive away teachers with high expectations for themselves and their students. This problem seems to have been alleviated *and* compounded by districts’ participation in consortia; as one district staff developer indicated, “our biggest challenge was to choose the actual assessment model...to submit because even though we worked in collaboration, we had 63 versions....” A few participants noted that data management is an enormous undertaking in this system.
- 3) *Teachers may lack the expertise to carry out STARS.* This concern is related to #2: that is, some teachers worried that they don’t have adequate training and expertise to handle the “overwhelming” tasks posed by STARS. An administrator put it this way: “We’re not trained to write tests. I couldn’t come up with a test. It’s a whole skill in and of itself.” One teacher described the following training experience:

They took us to the STARS workshop, and we kind of were given some general directions...And then we were allowed to fail. In fact, we were almost forced to fail. And then they told us what we needed to do different, and we made those corrections, and by the end of the week you kind of felt you as an individual kind of knew what we were doing, kind of. And then when you actually went out...[you] were back to frustration again.

4) *STARS requires clear and constant communication – to and with all stakeholders.*

Almost all of our participants described the challenges of “getting on the same page,” in terms of both information and consensus building. One administrator posed the former problem (dissemination of accurate information) this way: “[Y]ou can only distribute meaning slowly and in small groups.” He noted that this may account for NDE’s difficulty in getting everyone “on the same page.” But this is also a district challenge, this participant insisted, especially when we consider that “in most of the districts across the state 1/3 to 40% of our staff will turn over in five years.”

Teachers also noted that accurate information does not always “trickle down” to them. Several teachers we talked to never saw their DAP, and never understood the reporting process. Few knew what “quality criteria” are. One district staff developer reported that “[n]obody else in the whole district really knows what this process is.” Lack of information appears to lead to the second problem: lack of consensus. As one teacher suggested, “[I]t’s not easy to see the vision from [teachers’] point of view. And we got lots of input, but it was a very confusing, trusting kind of thing where we just had to follow the directions of what they were telling us to do and hope it would come out ok on the other side.” Even for districts in which teachers *are* more involved, consensus-building sometimes proves a challenge: “All of those pieces needed to go in place, and those visions had to mesh and make sure that everybody could live with what we came up with.”

5) *The public, and the media, may not understand the purposes and results of STARS.* A few participants worried that the public misinterprets results, or, alternatively, that they concern themselves only with Report Card grades and not their child’s performance level. These participants noted that the public needs to be educated about what kind of information STARS provides, and what kinds of information it *does not* provide. Parents do not necessarily know what kinds of questions to ask at conferences, for instance. One teacher added that the media sometimes exacerbates this problem: “even though we’ve taught this all for years, we keep hearing we’re lambasted for not doing this or that. The media gets ahold of it, and it makes you nervous.”

6) *STARS requires teachers to make continual adjustments on a short timetable.* One administrator summed up this concern: “The whole process, in a nutshell, seemed to be in such a rush to get done. The decisions were being made that were counteracting decisions that we made the week before... And there was a lot of redoing.” Another reported that “we needed to understand what was expected, and we were constantly trying to determine that because it was under construction, and that meaning of it was under construction.” This frustration is compounded by the fear that future changes, including those that might be required by the federal government, will render the present work irrelevant. As one teacher put it, “Do I want to put all this work into doing this and then have the state department say, ‘Well, we guess we made a mistake with this?’”

### Criticism of STARS

Implicit in participants' descriptions of some of the challenges of STARS is a criticism of the system. We identified the following criticisms:

- 1) *STARS keeps changing, and is not always clearly communicated.* This point follows from challenge # 6 above. In one district, teachers reported frequent shifts from the ESU and district levels: "it seems we're always on the verge of something new, and we never know where that goal is... They keep moving it around so much." In this district, "it's just a state of turmoil right now" because so many tests are coming from so many directions. Many participants suggested that the state seems to be "making it up as they go along." Teachers reported hearing different things from and about the state's plan: "Like last year – we didn't know what was going on half the time. And we'd hear one thing, and then we'd hear something else that would contradict what we heard the first time."
- 2) *STARS doesn't offer sufficient feedback for continuous school improvement.* Participants in a couple districts voiced strong concerns about the amount and quality of feedback offered by the state (though it should also be noted that one participant, a district staff developer, praised the "lengthy feedback" offered to that district.) One teacher claimed that "the state department has really done an injustice to us by not giving us more feedback. The portfolio we sent in with some of the individual assessments...were they quality? They gave us an overall [rating] but didn't specifically say, 'Okay, this assessment was good here, here, and here.'" An administrator noted that more fine-grained information of what and where to improve is necessary for school improvement.
- 3) *The information STARS generates may not be reliable.* Participants in three districts were dubious about the reliability of locally-developed and –administered tests, or about a particular result. An administrator cited an example in her own district of students with low IQ's scoring well on the statewide writing exam. As for concerns about the reliability and quality of local assessment, we heard the following the following comments, all from teachers:

We know we can have cut scores with what's 'proficient,' 'improving,' and beginning.' But as we go through this, every school is going to pass whatever the cut score grade is for themselves. I don't see any accountability when individual schools do this...I see no accountability.

[W]e think of these nationally normed tests as being written by somebody that really knows and they've been really tested and somebody's really focused on it. Here we are, classroom teachers that they pull out for a morning to do this, do this, do this, and then pull out after school when you're dead tired, and you work until 8 o'clock at night. You know, you wonder what kind of quality can come from this.

If the state wants a real honest test, they will have people coming into our school to give a test to the students, and the teachers will have nothing to do with it.

- 4) *STARS places emphasis on testing to the detriment of teaching.* Several participants shared the concern, articulated in the email exchange, that an increase in attention to testing requires a corresponding decrease in attention to teaching. One teacher asked: “[W]hat’s going to give? It’s the classroom. That’s what I think is going to give, because we have so many assessments and so many more assessments to do. We’re spending too much of our time assessing.” A teacher in another district agreed: “I think there’s too much testing. It’s drawing away from what you can teach. You can’t teach as much as you would have been able to.”
- 5) *STARS doesn’t trust teachers.* Teachers and an administrator in one district (but in separate interviews) felt strongly that the system devalues teachers’ professional work:

The thing that I find most insulting is having to document...my lesson plan. Excuse me? I’m a professional. And to me, to have to do that, is insulting to me. It’s like saying I’m a little kid and I have to prove....I know I’m doing an excellent job; I see what they learn. I’ve been teaching for ten years. And to have to document it now is like a slap in the face as a professional. (a teacher)

It’s to me very demeaning to say to a group of teachers, ‘You know, you’ve got to jump through all of these hoops because we don’t trust that you’re teaching what you’re supposed to be teaching.’ No one would do that in the medical profession – walk into surgery and say, ‘You’re using the wrong scalpel.’ (an administrator)

Why are they giving us the Quality Criteria if it’s local control? (same administrator)

### Suggestions for STARS

Participants offered a wide array of suggestions for improving the system:

- 1) *Slow it down.* Several participants hoped to see NDE somehow slow the process down, and some praised the state’s decision to return to Language Arts and Math before moving on to Science and Social Studies.
- 2) *Streamline the process.* In addition to slowing the process down, some participants wanted to see a more user-friendly system in which data management and reporting are simplified, and in which only the absolutely necessary components of the process are preserved.

- 3) *Give more concrete feedback.* A few participants expressed a desire for more specific, analytic feedback; one principal offered the following analogy: “It’d be kind of like a parent-teacher conference, where the state would be teacher and we be the parent. We need to understand how we’re doing. We need some dialogue.”
- 4) *Leave high-performing districts alone, or minimize testing* (possibly with a single test). As with criticism #4 above, we report here on separate interviews in a single district. These participants suggested exempting already successful schools from STARS, or, barring that, administering a single state or national test.
- 5) *Continue to honor the work that teachers do.* One teacher’s piece of advice is to continue to recognize that we as teachers giving the assessment are the best people to be scoring them. And it’s a real value that we’re providing instant feedback to our students about how well they performed, and we’re using that information to directly perfect our instruction. It’s not a matter of an outside group assessing our students and then telling us how they did.

Similarly, an administrator in another district said, “I think it’s a great process because...the ownership validates teachers as professionals, and other states, unfortunately, don’t get that opportunity, and I hope we always have that opportunity.”

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

*Even within this stratified sample of “successful” districts, we see a wide variety of perceptions of STARS, from condemnation to warm acceptance. Indeed, these five districts all engaged STARS differently, and found different paths to success within the system. One district participated only grudgingly, and its representatives continue to oppose the philosophy of STARS. In this district, morale was low, and administrators seemed to view themselves as “buffers” between the state/ESU/consortium and teachers. Two other districts essentially went along with their consortium or ESU, never fully committing or resisting STARS. Here, too, morale seemed low overall (though higher than in the first district), and teachers generally felt isolated from the reporting (if not the assessment) process. In these districts, administrators acted as conduits between the state/ESU/consortia and teachers; that is, they passed information (not always accurately, we should add) between the groups. Finally, in two districts, we saw a full embrace of STARS as an opportunity for local school improvement and professional development. In these districts, teachers were full and willing participants in assessment and reporting, and administrators acted as partners in school change and leaders of learning.*

Of course, only time will tell how these districts fare in the future, but our observations would lead us to predict that the latter districts are in the best position to continue their effective assessment and reporting work. After all, they are working on a foundation of strong, engaged leadership and solid teacher “buy-in.” While each district

we visited had clear strengths, and showed evidence of a strong commitment to teaching and learning, we believe districts most likely to continue succeeding in this system know and can do the following:

- 1) Successful districts know that school improvement is a continuous process, and they can take the long view. *Effective leaders of school improvement are not looking for a “quick fix,” and they do not expect miracles. Rather, they patiently and incrementally piece together a long-term plan. But they are also open to learning along the way; as one teacher indicated, “We didn’t know what it would look like until we accomplished what we accomplished.” Several participants noted that the process got easier as it went along (as predicted by our survey respondents), and that the math assessments were going more smoothly because the process had been worked through once. These districts started early, and availed themselves of training and other professional development opportunities whenever possible. And while participants judged their DAPs an accurate portrait of their local assessment work (as did our survey respondents), they also understood that it is a diagnostic tool, a starting point rather than an endpoint.*
- 2) *Successful districts can see the big picture, and take a holistic, integrative perspective on school improvement.* This means, first of all, understanding the larger process of which the district is a part. One participant reported that she had come from a state with a state test, and knew first-hand “how that drives curriculum and how it’s so controlling.” She reported that when people understand some of the other alternatives, they more readily see the virtues of the Nebraska system.

Seeing the big picture also means tying work on STARS to school improvement:

Every year you have to evaluate the job that you’ve done, and then you try to fix anything that may be broken; you try to tweak anything that may need adjusting, etc. I don’t care how good of a teacher you are; you can improve, and the system as a whole can improve. And that’s basically the goal of this. It’s not just assessing the student more. In a bigger picture, it’s school improvement.

Even within this small sample of successful districts, we saw that when key personnel – administrators and teachers – either do not understand or do not believe in STARS, school climate and morale suffers. In these districts, staff operates out of need to comply, rather than a shared commitment. But when staff see their work on STARS as embedded in the school improvement process, and when they see assessment as embedded in the local curriculum, they (and their students) tend to respond positively.

- 3) *At the same time, successful districts operate from a primary commitment to local values.* All the districts we visited had a strong set of local values, and saw their school improvement work as chiefly aimed at serving local teaching and learning

needs, with the state's needs being secondary. One superintendent perhaps put it best:

[H]ow we report [our results] out isn't as much of a concern as the process and getting kids to where they're supposed to be... We're saying, 'We're not doing this for you. We're doing this for us.' And ultimately, that's the way it's supposed to be. So we're feeling really good about where we're going and what's happening. It's a lot of work, and the teachers understand that we don't just [do this] one time. We're going to continue every year looking at results, changing our curriculum [, etc.]... We already have assessments. All we're changing is how we document things.

More succinctly, a teacher put it this way: "[T]his makes sense to us. And it seems to satisfy them, so..." What these administrators and teachers understand is that local vision must guide the work. Another way to say this is that successful districts know that they have many options, and they do what is right for their local context.

- 4) *Successful districts know the resources available to them, and communicate whenever necessary with their ESUs and NDE.* ESUs played a crucial role in the districts we visited – mostly for good, but in at least one case for ill. When ESUs act as responsible liaisons between the state and districts, and when they serve as resources and partners for districts, their leadership can be a tremendous boon. In some cases, however, ESUs have apparently overstepped their bounds, participated in disenfranchising teachers from the STARS process, and disseminated bad information. Successful districts must be prepared to go straight to NDE when ESUs are hindering rather than enhancing their work. Fortunately, participants (even those resistant to STARS) reported that NDE – and especially Coordinator of Assessment Roschewski and Commissioner Christensen – have been available to them, and receptive to their feedback.
- 5) *Successful districts know how to create mechanisms for widely shared ownership, especially among teachers.* First, when teachers and administrators alike have “buy-in,” the process is likely to go much more smoothly. Here are three brief process descriptions from different districts that show the importance of involving teachers as full participants:

I think the whole process went better as we went along, and in both committees there are classroom teachers as well as administrators who became a part of the group. And all had equal voices.

We really tried to get our teachers involved in the entire process so that they knew top-to-bottom what was going on and their part in this whole portfolio.

It...started out as our administrators facilitating it, and then they pretty much said, ‘You know, you guys, administration changes, but you guys are probably going to be here for the long haul. So we want you to run with it.’ So they’ve kind of stepped back now and let us as a group of teachers do the writing [of assessments].

In addition to shared ownership between teachers and administrators, we also saw a growing sense of shared ownership *among* teachers – across grade levels and across disciplines. We have already quoted one fourth-grade teacher who sees the importance of spreading responsibility for standards and assessment across grade levels; this concern was widely shared across all sections of this study. As one administrator suggested, the ideal environment is one in which “[e]verybody’s held accountable – students, teachers, administrators.” This holds across content areas as well; as one teacher said,

[W]e know what we have to do from here on out is make these assessments incorporate more than just one area. We may give an assessment that assesses a Language Arts standard, and it may also address a Math standard. Otherwise, we feel that we’re going to be overwhelmed with testing these kids.

- 6) *Successful districts know that administrators must be leaders of learning, not mere “managers.”* Teachers noted that good administrators offer encouragement and secure the necessary resources (grant money, time) to do the work required by this process. But as we have suggested, strong leaders also develop a powerful district vision and a process to enact that vision; integrate the vision and process into STARS; and help their staff become fully engaged in STARS. They are more than managers of people or handlers of paperwork; they are leaders of learning.

What can NDE do to support the development of these kinds of districts? How can it respond to the suggestions offered by our participants? We offer the following **recommendations**:

- 1) *Promote cross-grade and cross-curricular teamwork.* The intense pressure reported here and elsewhere in our study by fourth-grade teachers suggests that in many districts, the bulk of the responsibility for STARS continues to fall on the shoulders of those teaching at the reporting grades. We advise offering workshops or trainings specifically designed to promote cross-grade and cross-curricular teamwork, perhaps starting with adjacent grades (3<sup>rd</sup> and fifth; 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>; 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>). The message needs to be clear that STARS is the responsibility of *all* teachers.
- 2) *Offer more, or more concrete, feedback to districts on their assessment systems.* The most effective way to build commitment to STARS is to provide districts with information that is useful and useable to them locally. It appears that the

feedback districts received from the portfolio reviewers during the first year was hit-and-miss: some districts received lengthy, specific feedback, while others received very little beyond the rating itself. Rating nearly six hundred districts is, to be sure, a daunting task, but if the state intends to mount a data-driven, continuous, locally controlled assessment and accountability system, it will need to provide the kind of information that best serves that purpose. We understand that the Buros Institute has designed a new online rating form for portfolio reviewers; perhaps it will be a vehicle for more concrete and consistent feedback for districts.

- 3) *Build trust in the information generated by STARS.* Placing responsibility for assessment in the hands of teachers and administrators – rather than remote “experts” – runs counter to prevailing educational thought, and the rationale for doing so must be continually articulated and reinforced. As we have seen, some teachers do not believe they have the technical expertise to execute this “school-based, teacher-led” system. Perhaps the best way to build a sense of self-efficacy and trust in the system is to share “success stories,” especially those that feature instructionally sound and technically rigorous classroom assessment. Of course, as assessment literacy grows, so will teacher confidence. With respect to the district ratings, districts need to be reassured that the results of the portfolio reviews are reliable. Rating procedures are not widely known; they should be publicized.
- 4) *Help more districts incorporate assessment into their teaching and learning efforts, and STARS into their school improvement process.* Again, successful districts are committed to assessment and accountability because they serve local school improvement. They are not a sop to authority, but rather part of an ongoing process aimed at improving teaching and learning. NDE must continue to stress that this process is not in service of compliance – even if it fulfills that purpose; rather, it is primarily in service of better classroom practice and curricula. It must also make clear that STARS is not about assessing *more*; it is about assessing *better*. In addition to sharing models and staying “on message” in its correspondence, workshops, and trainings, NDE might consider designing mechanisms whereby districts that have done this work effectively can share their process directly with other districts, perhaps in the form of regional conferences, a workshop series, or a visitation program.

## *Chapter 3*

### *Statewide Writing Assessment*

The only legislatively-stipulated statewide exam in Nebraska is the Statewide Writing Assessment (SWA). LB812 requires that student samples be used to assess writing in three grades. The Nebraska State Board of Education has chosen grades 4, 8, and 11, and has determined (according to policy guidelines adopted in January of 2000) that the writing samples must be produced under the following conditions:

- ◆ each student writes on the same topic
- ◆ each student is given a prompt (topic) to establish the context for his/her writing
- ◆ each student is given the same amount of time to complete the task
- ◆ each student is scored against a uniform set of criteria based on the common traits found in writing

In 2001, all three grades participated in a pilot run. In 2002, grade 4 was assessed, and it will be followed by grade 8 in 2003 and grade 11 in 2004. Students are given 35 minutes on two consecutive days to complete the test. Fourth graders are asked to write in narrative mode; 8<sup>th</sup> graders in descriptive mode; and 11<sup>th</sup> graders in persuasive mode. Their work is evaluated by raters – Nebraska teachers – at three regional sites within the state, and a stratified random sample is sent out of state for review as well. The evaluation is based on the “Six Trait” writing, a program that is based on the work of Vickie Spandel and is in use in other states as well. The Six Traits are

- ◆ Ideas and content
- ◆ Organization
- ◆ Voice
- ◆ Word Choice
- ◆ Sentence Fluency
- ◆ Conventions

Students receive a holistic score of between 1 and 4 from each of two raters, and the composite score becomes their final rating. Non-adjacent scores are “arbitrated” by a third rater. Raters are thoroughly trained with common professional practices such as employing table leaders to monitor the work of groups of raters and to arbitrate third readings; identifying potential sources of rater bias; carefully explaining the scoring guide; introducing numerous examples and “anchor papers”; performing practice sets; and so on. Results of the SWA are analyzed for technical quality by the Buros Center for Testing, which also facilitates the standard-setting process each year that determines proficiency levels. Once the cut score has been established, schools receive electronic and written reports of the results at the district, building, and student levels.

Results from the pilot Statewide Writing Assessment were impressive, with 79% of fourth graders, 65% of eighth graders, and 73% of eleventh graders earning ratings that satisfy the Nebraska standards for writing for Grade 11 (*proficient* or *exemplary*). In February 2002, the exam was administered to all Nebraska fourth graders. The fourth-grade results have not yet been released as of the drafting of this report.

Our research questions for this section of the study included the following:

- ◆ How were teachers informed about and trained for the SWA?
- ◆ How were students informed about and prepared for the SWA?
- ◆ What do teachers perceive to be the benefits and challenges of the SWA?
- ◆ How does the SWA inform classroom practice?
- ◆ How does the SWA affect school climate – morale, faculty communication, teacher efficacy, and so on?
- ◆ How do teachers evaluate the English Language Learners (ELL) and Special Education (SPED) inclusion accommodations for the SWA?
- ◆ How do teachers evaluate the usefulness of the information provided by the SWA?
- ◆ What ideas do teachers have for improving the SWA?

### **Research Design**

In addition to analyzing documents related to the SWA, we conducted 23 interviews in March and April 2002. Interviewees included 3 elementary principals and 50 fourth-grade teachers who administered the Statewide Writing Assessment in 11 school districts across Nebraska. They had an average of 18 years in education. Of those reporting highest degree, 20 had earned their Masters, 2 a specialist degree, and 18 a Bachelors.

The 11 districts were chosen to represent a range of geographic regions and district sizes. All told, they represent 11 different counties scattered across Nebraska, and they range from just over 200 students to almost 5,000.

**District 1** is a medium-sized district in the northeastern part of the state with 873 students. One interview: one school, three teachers.

**District 2** is a large district in the northeastern part of the state with 4,131 students. Five interviews: four schools, seven teachers.

**District 3** is a small district in the southeastern part of the state with 245 students. One interview: one school, one teacher and one administrator.

**District 4** is a large district in the eastern part of the state with 2,792 students. One interview: one school, twelve teachers.

**District 5** is a small district in the northeastern part of the state with 623 students. One interview: one school, two teachers.

**District 6** is a medium-sized district in the central part of the state with 900 students. One interview: one school, three teachers.

**District 7** is a small district in the western part of the state with 489 students. One interview: one school, two teachers.

**District 8** is a large district in the central part of the state with 4,564 students. Nine interviews: nine schools, fourteen teachers and one administrator.

**District 9** is a medium-sized district in the central part of the state with 812 students. One interview: one school, three teachers.

**District 10** is a small district in the northern part of the state with 417 students (k-8). One interview: one school, one teacher.

**District 11** is a small district in the central part of the state with 222 students (k-6). One interview: one school, two teachers and one administrator.

*(Numbers of students based on 2000-01 reports.)*

The interview questions may be found in Appendix C. Participants were informed by the field researcher that

- ◆ they were being asked to participate in an independent research and evaluation project run out of the University of Nebraska;
- ◆ their names and schools would be known only to the researchers, and they would not be identified in any research reports or other writing produced by the researchers;
- ◆ they had the right to refuse participation or withdraw from the project at any time;
- ◆ they had the right to request copies of research results; and
- ◆ their relationship with NDE and UNL would not be adversely affected by their participation, or by withholding participation, in this study.

Some interviews were conducted with individuals, but most were conducted in a focus group format. All interviews were tape recorded with permission of the participants, and transcriptions were sent to each interviewee for data verification.

Interview transcripts were analyzed several times for patterns and themes. In consultation with the field researchers, and through multiple readings of the transcripts, Dr. Gallagher coded participants' statements in response to each question and then drafted the report. This draft was shared with the field researchers, who checked it for accuracy and completeness, and was revised, with their advice, into its current form.

## **Findings**

Our study suggests that on the whole, the SWA has strong support among teachers, owing in large part, no doubt, to strong state leadership and ample professional development opportunities in this area. Teachers view the SWA as more manageable and less onerous than other pieces of STARS. They report that the process is understandable (with the possible exception of SPED and ELL accommodations) and user-friendly. Participants of this study are in general agreement about the benefits of the SWA for themselves and their students, chief among them that writing has become a statewide educational priority. They also generally endorse the Six Trait writing model that the state has adopted, and appreciate the clear connection between this curricular program and the assessment. They are, for the most part, committed to the teaching of writing, and they see the SWA as supporting their work in this area.

At the same time, teachers are quick to point out the limitations of the SWA, and in particular the test itself. We see some clear patterns in this area as well. Even the staunchest supporters of Six Trait writing see room for improvement of the examination. Our participants offer significant critiques of the test and, in our view, valuable recommendations for how to improve it in years to come.

Our more specific findings follow.

### ***1) Teachers are well informed about the SWA, receiving information about it from a wide variety of sources.***

Teachers overwhelmingly reported that they were adequately informed about the purpose and procedures of the SWA. In fact, only three of the fifty-three participants in our study believed that they were *not* adequately informed. Teachers cited the following as sources of information about the SWA, in descending order of frequency:

- a. Principals and other building administrators
- b. District and ESU staff developers, including assessment coordinators
- c. Workshops and trainings (see # 2)
- d. Other teachers (in grade-level meetings, or in-house workshops/trainings)
- e. Updates and other materials from NDE (tool kit, packets)

It is clear that local and state leaders of the SWA have done an exemplary job informing teachers about the SWA.

The one exception, noted by a couple participants and displayed by many others, is the accommodations/inclusion procedures for SPED and ELL students, which we explore

in #10 below. We found considerable confusion among teachers about the guidelines governing accommodations for students.

## ***2) Teachers had ample professional development opportunities relating to the SWA.***

The teachers we interviewed were not only well informed; they were also well trained. Virtually without exception, teachers cited a wide range of professional development opportunities, including, again in descending order of frequency:

- a. District workshops and inservices
- b. ESU and NDE workshops and inservices
- c. Building workshops and staff meetings
- d. Courses at Peru State, Wayne State, University of Nebraska at Kearney
- e. Vicki Spandel and Six Trait professional development materials
- f. Assessment trainings (district and state scoring, Buros one-day training)
- g. General professional literature on teaching writing
- h. Conferences (e.g., the State Reading Conference)

Teachers who reported having no specific training regarding the SWA claimed not to have needed it because they were already doing Six Traits in their classrooms. In fact, several districts had adopted Six Traits before the state did. It is important to note that few participants reported professional development specifically on assessment (models of assessment, assumptions and principles of assessment, etc.); most workshops and inservices addressed Six Traits primarily, incorporating assessment *within* the Six Traits framework. Still, the teachers who administered this test statewide were not only *informed* about the SWA, but also knowledgeable about its professional practice.

## ***3) Teachers did little by way of preparing their students specifically for the SWA – primarily because they were doing Six Trait writing all year long.***

Because the curricular program on which the SWA is based (Six Traits) is integrated into local curricula, teachers perceived themselves to be preparing students for the test by virtue of delivering the curriculum. In most cases, preparing students for the actual taking of the exam – sitting for it and completing it – was minimal. Several teachers, in fact, made a point of downplaying the significance of the exam itself to relieve students' potential anxiety. Because they practice writing all year long – sometimes in timed environments – students generally viewed the assessment as “just another writing day.” Teachers reported spending more time on narrative writing; giving more timed practice sessions; focusing with students on Six Trait language (in their readings and writing) – but the real preparation for the exam is the writing students do as part of the curriculum:

- ◆ “All we did was write.”
- ◆ “[Preparation] is just ongoing, as their writing is.”
- ◆ “It’s just in place; it’s in the curriculum.”
- ◆ “[T]he writing part is just constant.”
- ◆ “[I]t’s all connected.”

Because the curriculum is aligned with the assessment, teachers saw little need to “teach to the test” in the narrow sense of that phrase. On the other hand, many did report focusing more on writing generally, placing more emphasis on it in their curriculum. Some districts are even conducting district assessments (usually in the fall) similar to the SWA, and so students do not experience the SWA as unusual or unique.

**4) Teachers perceive that the SWA brings a wide array of benefits for their classroom work.**

Most teachers agreed that the SWA has salutary effects on classrooms. They reported the following:

- ◆ *The SWA provides a common vocabulary to describe writing.* Teachers from across grade levels and across the curriculum are now on the same page, we were told, because they share terminology. Language to describe writing has also become a tool for effective classroom instruction. Approximately half of the participants cited this benefit.
- ◆ *The SWA encourages teachers to focus more of their instructional energy on writing.* More than half of the teachers we interviewed indicated that they and their colleagues are now more “focused” on writing, teaching it more and paying closer attention to the quality of the work students produce. As one participant told us, “I just think writing is so important that I’m glad [the state is] pushing that. I think it’s needed.”
- ◆ *The SWA provides an additional piece of information,* “another step to see where kids are” in their learning. About one-third of our participants told us they valued the SWA for providing a kind of “reality check” for their more regular, classroom-based assessments of their students.
- ◆ *When coupled with other assessments, the SWA can help show growth or progress in student writing.* Several teachers mentioned that the spring state assessment can be combined with fall district assessments to track students’ growth over time, especially when both tests are scored analytically (at the local level).

Only one of the 23 interviews yielded no information about the benefits of the SWA for teachers. On the other hand, there was significant agreement about its merits.

**5) Teachers also perceive that the SWA presents a wide array of challenges for their classroom work.**

While we did not find quite the degree of consensus on challenges as we did on benefits, several themes emerged here as well:

- ◆ *Finding time, and room in the curriculum, for Six Trait writing is a challenge.* Several participants noted that writing must share time with other fourth-grade assessment priorities, and “covering” the traits by the time of the February deadline was widely felt to be a difficult task.
- ◆ *A related point: Fourth-grade teachers in particular are overwhelmed with assessment.* Again and again, participants noted that fourth grade-teachers are bearing the brunt of the assessment responsibility, and this is leading to considerable frustration among these teachers.
- ◆ *The test is inconsistent with teaching writing as a process.* As we will see under #8 below, several teachers worried that the SWA narrows instructional energy to the production of narrative writing in inauthentic learning environments. These teachers claimed that this one-shot, impromptu writing exam does not capture students’ best efforts, or accurately reflect their writing ability. We believe this is a serious concern, and it speaks to our longer-term recommendation below.
- ◆ *In many districts, public misconceptions arise from holistic and comparative reporting of results.* As one participant stated, “Perceptions drive attitudes, and attitudes drive behaviors. We don’t know that our public understands anything other than the score, and that’s not beneficial to what we’re trying to do.” Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with holistic scoring, claiming that it does not help them to improve instruction, and in fact feeds into simplistic understandings of learning as reducible to a single number (see #13 below). They also noted that the media and the public are often quick to compare scores to state averages, a sometimes misleading practice.

It is important to note that while the majority of the *benefits* of the SWA were ascribed to Six Trait writing, the bulk of the *challenges* posed by the SWA are ascribed to the test and its reporting.

#### **6) Teachers perceive that the SWA brings a wide array of benefits for students.**

As was the case with their perceptions of the benefits of STARS for teachers, participants’ perceptions of benefits of STARS for students are marked by considerable enthusiasm and consensus.

- ◆ *Six Trait writing instruction improves student writing.* As one participant put it, students benefit from focusing on goals and explicit targets: “their writing is improving because of the end product.” Another explained: “it’s a good thing that they had the rubric and that the rubric is as clear as it is, because that gives them a very clear target as to what they need to hit... And when you teach that way, they learn to know what good writing looks like.”

- ◆ *Students learn through having available language to describe writing.* Like teachers, students benefit from the shared context that Six Trait language provides. When students learn to talk about writing, several participants reported, they become better writers. They also benefit from the consistency of instruction provided by Six Traits.
- ◆ *A related point: Six Traits gives students a tool to self-reflect and to evaluate their own work.* Again, several teachers who administer fall district assessments noted that students benefit from seeing progress in their own writing over time. This can lead to students' pride in their work, thus enhancing their motivation and engagement in the intellectual work of writing.
- ◆ *The examination gives students another opportunity to write.* Several participants noted that the exam itself offers students "another practice" in actual writing, signaling to them that writing is important and ongoing. A couple teachers added that writing under timed conditions is a useful skill.

Again, we see here that Six Trait writing is the engine of the positive perceptions of the SWA; only this last theme relates directly to the test itself.

#### ***7) Teachers also perceive that the SWA presents a wide array of challenges for students.***

All the information we received regarding challenges posed by the SWA for students pertains to the test itself, not Six Trait writing. In fact, most comments in this part of the interviews relate specifically to *testing conditions*. Three themes developed here:

- ◆ *The timeframe for the test is difficult for fourth graders to negotiate.* This was by far the complaint we heard the most, with over half the participants citing this challenge. Several participants noted that the two-day timed writing sessions are too long for some students, and too short for others. Some also noted that writing on back-to-back days is challenging for students who may need more time away from their draft before they revise and copy.
- ◆ *Fourth graders have a difficult time with broad prompts and narrative writing.* Several teachers reported that their students experienced difficulty narrowing their topics and responding to vague prompts. Some questioned whether fourth-grade students are developmentally ready for the challenges of narrative writing, and wondered if perhaps creative or descriptive writing would be more appropriate (see #13 below).
- ◆ *The exam situation intimidates and frustrates fourth graders.* Like teachers, students get "burned out on all of the testing that we do in fourth grade," as one teacher put it. About a third of our participants reported that their students were often "frustrated," "anxious," and "stressed."

***8) Teachers report that Six Trait writing has led to profound improvements in classroom practice, but that the writing exam itself has not.***

The most obvious and significant impact on classroom practice, of course, has been the incorporation of the Six Trait writing program into local curricula and classrooms. Participants uniformly approved Six Traits. This comment was not atypical:

It's made me more aware of what goes into good writing...myself...in years past we have concentrated on the capital letters, the periods...you know, more the mechanics, which is stressed [in Six Trait writing], but you have to stress the other things too.

Teachers reported spending more time on narrative writing, on timed writing sessions, and on each of the six traits. Several teachers noted that Six Traits was also helping teachers work across the curriculum. Some teachers share rubrics and writing samples with their students, and help their students to self-assess using Six Trait language. Overall, teachers were pleased with how Six Trait writing supports and enhances their classroom practice.

They were generally less complimentary about the impact of the exam itself on classroom practice. In fact, while a few teachers praised the exam for being “authentic” because it asks students to produce an actual piece of writing, still more claimed the opposite: that the timed writing exam presents an “artificial learning situation,” and is inconsistent with their approach to teaching writing as a process. One participant put it simply: “[the exam situation is] not the way we teach writing.” We also heard that the test “doesn’t seem real” because it “doesn’t show what they [students] can actually create.” Finally, teachers noted that the exam, taken alone, and reported holistically, doesn’t show growth or progress. They complained that “a single number” does not offer a nuanced picture of their students’ writing, thus rendering the test results of limited use for the purposes of improving classroom instruction. In short, most participants did not view the exam itself as having salutary effects on classroom practice; on the contrary, a number noted that it is inconsistent with their process-based approach to writing instruction.

***9) Teachers report that the SWA has had some negative affects on school climate and teacher morale, but those effects have been negligible compared to those generated by other aspects of STARS. In fact, the SWA has, in some cases, improved school climate and boosted teacher morale.***

We heard from a number of teachers that the SWA is “just another responsibility” assigned to fourth-grade teachers, who are already overburdened. When asked how the SWA has affected morale, one participant replied, “Very negatively. We are just bogged down...especially fourth-grade teachers.” This same teacher noted that teaching doesn’t seem “fun” anymore because so much emphasis is placed on assessment and accountability. Several other teachers noted that district comparisons tend to deflate morale. Even more agree that fourth-grade teachers are overwhelmed with assessments.

But we also heard another refrain: that the SWA is not as burdensome as other features of STARS. One participant put this issue into perspective: “Whenever you have a new expectation or a new learning process, you have to stretch, and some of us stretch easier than others.” In fact, about one-third of our participants reported that the SWA is having positive effects, beginning with encouraging teachers to collaborate in their efforts to teach writing. One participant reported that

[y]ou could walk in [to our school], and the k-12 staff is knowledgeable about the whole process. There’s nobody left out in the woods, from the business teacher to the tech teacher, and...department groups like our second, third, and fourth grade teachers...they’ve really talked. They know what they’re each doing.

As this statement implies, cross-grade collaboration is often a key to relieving low morale, especially among fourth-grade teachers.

Of course, several teachers also noted the obvious: that when the results are positive, morale tends to be high. As in most endeavors, good results prove to be reassuring.

***10) There is considerable confusion and dissatisfaction among teachers regarding the guidelines governing inclusion procedures for Special Education students and English Language Learners.***

Less than half of the teachers we interviewed perceived the accommodations for SPED and/or ELL to be appropriate and adequate. Moreover, teachers on the whole did not demonstrate a clear understanding of which accommodations were available, for whom, and under what conditions. Some told us that they didn’t think any accommodations were allowed; some thought that giving students more time was the only allowable accommodation; some used students’ IEPs to determine accommodations; and some simply expressed confusion about the guidelines. We also heard several complaints about reporting procedures that don’t account for these populations of students, thus “throwing off” the results. Several participants requested that NDE re-examine its accommodation and reporting procedures. These teachers noted that the students tend to come away from this testing experience with a very negative attitude toward writing.

Perhaps the more important finding here is that teachers did not seem to have a clear understanding of *why these students are included in the assessment in the first place*. We found little recognition among the teachers we interviewed of the rationale for comprehensive inclusion.

***11) Teachers do not perceive the SWA as providing meaningful or useful information to non-teachers.***

Overwhelmingly, teachers did not view the information provided by SWA as useful to any non-teachers other than NDE. In fact, several claimed that the SWA results are misleading, and actually hurt community relations. Most of these teachers agreed that the reporting of holistic scores is of limited, if any, use to parents, in particular. This part of our interviews generated the most negative comments – perhaps because it is tied to

reporting – and we heard from several participants that the results are really only useful for “political bean-counters.” A few participants did suggest that information provided by the SWA is useful to schools, including administrators, and a few more noted that the result *may* be used by teachers in talking with parents conferences (especially when coupled with a fall district assessment), but the majority of our interviewees take a dim view of the uses of the information generated by the SWA.

***12) Teachers would like to see a number of changes made to the test and its reporting.***

Suggestions from teachers on how to improve the SWA all involved the test (and its scoring/reporting), and may be categorized in the following way:

- ◆ *Changes in the format of the test.* Many teachers hoped to see the time limit for the examination changed, either by giving students more time, or by expanding the time *between* the test days. As we have suggested, some teachers viewed *any* timed testing condition as anathema, and they suggested a move to a portfolio system. Teachers complaining about the difficulty their students face with narrative writing proposed a switch to either creative or descriptive writing, or at least narrower, more concrete, and perhaps multiple prompts. Finally, a couple participants proposed that the state revisit and revise their guidelines for ELL/SPED accommodations/inclusion.
- ◆ *Changes in the timing of the test.* Here we refer both to the time of year, and the year in which the test is administered. A few teachers thought the test should be moved to later in the year, perhaps in March, in order to allow for more thorough teaching of Six Traits. Far more teachers proposed moving the test to another grade altogether, perhaps to fifth or sixth grade, which are not as overwhelmed with assessment.
- ◆ *Changes in scoring/reporting.* The sentiment on which we received the most consensus among teachers was that, from the standpoint of diagnosing students’ needs and improving instruction, analytic scoring would be far more useful than is holistic scoring. In addition to wanting more feedback, these teachers worried that holistic scores lend themselves to simplistic, inappropriate, and perhaps dangerous comparisons among districts.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

In accordance with LB 812 and state board policy, the SWA is intended to assist teachers in determining students’ progress in meeting state or local standards for writing. While using consistent procedures, prompts, and scoring mechanisms, the SWA is also designed to align closely with classroom practice, and to be integrated into local writing curricula.

There seems little doubt that the SWA is indeed fulfilling its statutory and policy mission. But more than that, it is clear that the SWA is encouraging more teachers across

the state to pay more attention to writing instruction.

This is happening largely because teachers enthusiastically endorse Six Trait writing instruction. While we do see some predictable anxiety and frustration among teachers regarding the SWA, it is muted compared to our findings on other pieces of STARS. Moreover, while teachers are much less positive about the test itself than about Six Traits writing instruction, most clearly value the match of curriculum and assessment. At the same time, they do not view Six Traits as merely a test preparation package; indeed, for many teachers, the test itself is but an afterthought. Thus, for the teachers we've talked to, the value of SWA lies not in having a standardized test, but rather in having a curricular and pedagogical program that improves teaching and learning.

Our **shorter-term recommendations** entail primarily minor changes in how the SWA is conducted and supported. Our first recommendation, in fact, is this:

- 1) *Do not make major changes to the SWA at this time.* Significant changes are not only unwarranted by the findings of this study, but we believe they would be unwise, given teachers' explicit wish for consistency in the standards, assessment, and accountability process, as well as their warm support for Six Trait writing. It is particularly important to continue to offer, and support, frequent and widely distributed information and training. Under the leadership of Sue Anderson, NDE has done a wonderful job communicating to and training teachers, and it must continue to do so in order to maintain teachers' good faith and best efforts. It must also continue its work with locals in designing and offering regular, high-quality information and training sessions.
- 2) *Sponsor cross-curricular and cross-grade commitments to Six Traits.* For a program such as Six Traits to work, it ultimately must be the responsibility of all teachers, not just Language Arts teachers. That is, students should be introduced to and held accountable for producing quality writing in *all* of their classes. This means bringing content area teachers on board, as well as teachers from across all grades. NDE can help districts and individual schools build this sense of shared responsibility by offering training and workshops targeted at content area teachers. It can also provide resources for local trainings and workshops of this sort. Finally, it can publicize models for developing a building-wide approach (such models are not, in our experience, difficult to find: many districts have been utilizing such an approach for several years). In addition to making good educational sense, such an approach also alleviates pressure on fourth-grade teachers, as some of our participants attest.
- 3) *Help teachers understand not only the inclusion/accommodation procedures for the SWA, but also their purpose in the bigger picture.* Frankly, it is not clear to us why teachers are confused by SPED/ELL guidelines, which are (in our view) clearly articulated in STARS Updates as well as mailings to schools. It may be that these documents do not find their way to teachers. Alternatively, teachers might be "blocked" on these guidelines because they do not understand the bigger picture of inclusion. Again, we found little evidence that participants understood

the philosophy informing the principle of inclusion. Perhaps understandably in our competitive culture, reporting is sometimes viewed as a kind of shell game, and the “trick” is to make SPED/ELL students disappear. In some cases, these students are not viewed as full members of their academic community whose arbitrary exclusion would create a misleading portrait of the district, as well as shortchange those students. NDE must take steps to ensure that students are not swept under the reporting rug in order to protect district ratings. This effort begins, we believe, with sharing the philosophy of including *all* students in assessment and reporting.

- 4) *Make minor format changes to the test.* We are persuaded by teachers’ arguments that students would benefit from a choice between (at least) two concrete and clearly written prompts. The time and cost involved in training scorers on an extra prompt would be minimal, and on the positive side, students are less likely to be forced to write on a topic they do not understand or find engaging. We also believe that expanding the timeframe for the exam would be appropriate. In order to facilitate students’ use of the writing process, we advise three time periods: one for drafting, one for revising and editing, and one (of a shorter duration) for copying (and final polishing). This would allow students to move through their entire writing process rather than forcing them to collapse or conflate different stages of the process, as teachers report them doing under present test conditions. On the other hand, we are not convinced that the test should be moved to later in the year, or that narrative writing is developmentally inappropriate for fourth graders – assuming the prompt is narrow and concrete enough.
- 5) *Offer the **option** of analytic scoring, or, failing that, offer assistance and resources to local districts that wish to score their own papers analytically.* Like many of the teachers who made this recommendation in our study, we understand the increased cost and labor involved in the move from holistic to analytic scoring. On the other hand, Sue Anderson has proven herself to be an efficient coordinator of the SWA, and we are confident that a test run of analytic scoring for at least a subset of the papers would be manageable and appropriate. This would also show teachers, who overwhelmingly desire analytic scoring for instructional purposes, that the SWA is indeed in service of improved teaching and learning. If state analytic scoring is infeasible, NDE could still provide funding and expertise to schools that wish to score their students’ papers analytically on the local level.
- 6) *Help teachers and administrators put the test to local use.* The teachers in our study who got the most from, and were most supportive of, the SWA were those who used it for local purposes – in classrooms, in parent conferences, in staff meetings. Districts that administer a similar test in the fall have a baseline against which to compare the spring data. Some districts score their own tests analytically, as a supplement to the holistic data provided by the state. Some teachers keep copies of their students’ writing to show parents at conferences. By

publicizing these kinds of activities, NDE can help teachers and administrators see how to incorporate the SWA into their curriculum and local assessment practice.

If enacted, each of these shorter-term recommendations would address teachers' compelling concerns about the test, and would build upon the good work begun by the SWA. There is no doubt, as we have seen, that the SWA is having a positive impact on many teachers and students. The current SWA makes good sense for a state in which writing instruction has not been a major focus (as teachers in our study attest).

However, we do not believe the SWA, as currently configured, will allow Nebraska's teachers and students to continue to grow in the coming years, or allow the state to become a leader in this area of assessment. Therefore, we offer one **longer-term recommendation**:

- ◆ *Move toward a more complex, rigorous, and authentic writing assessment.*

The current SWA is in line with methods other states have been using for a decade or more. But today, the leading states in writing assessment – Kentucky and Oregon, for instance – have shifted to more authentic assessment systems, with dramatic results for their students' learning and their teachers' professional development. These systems do not require artificial testing conditions – a timed environment, an assigned prompt, an injunction not to interact with others. Instead – typically using a portfolio or “work sample” model – they assess students' writing under actual writing conditions, including a real rhetorical context (purpose and audience) and ample time to develop ideas and attend to process. They also require more rigorous intellectual work in order to attain proficiency.

Why should Nebraska be interested in such systems, when the current SWA is “working”? As we have suggested, the current SWA has gotten writing instruction “off the ground,” as it were, in Nebraska – a valuable service, to be sure. This is not to say, however, that it goes far enough in promoting good writing. Indeed, whatever the merits of the Six Trait model, we believe that the SWA may ultimately promote formulaic writing that pays more attention to structure than it does to content.

This tendency is especially apparent at the 11<sup>th</sup> grade level. Although “ideas and content” is included among the six traits, the criteria for a 4 paper – the highest score – on the 11<sup>th</sup> grade persuasive writing scoring guide are not, in our view, sufficiently rigorous:

- ◆ clearly conveys author's opinion
- ◆ is well focused on prompt
- ◆ contains numerous, relevant, supporting examples
- ◆ is distinctive in its approach

Compare these criteria, for instance, to the content-related criteria used in the Kentucky Holistic Scoring System to identify a “Distinguished” paper (for grades 4, 7, and 12):

- ◆ establishes a purpose and maintains a clear focus; strong awareness of audience; evidence of distinctive voice and/or appropriate tone;

- ◆ depth and complexity of ideas supported by rich, engaging, and pertinent details; evidence of analysis, reflection, insight (qtd. in Hillocks 167)

To be sure, both sets of criteria are vague, but the latter calls for higher-order thinking. The supporting details need to be not only “numerous” and “relevant,” but “rich,” “engaging,” and “pertinent.” Rather than a “distinctive approach,” the Kentucky rubric calls more concretely for “depth and quality of ideas” and “evidence of analysis, reflection, insight.” And instead of asking only for a clearly conveyed opinion, the Kentucky assessment asks students to establish a purpose, and to focus on audience.

It may be that this comparison is unfair, as the Kentucky rubric refers to *portfolios* of students’ writing. But this is our point: the on-demand format of the SWA severely limits the type and quality of writing students produce. This becomes clear when we examine the exemplars identified by the state as top-scoring papers.

The first example was an anchor paper for a score of 4 in the Grade 11 SWA training guide. The prompt was this:

*Assume that the Nebraska legislature is considering a bill that would prohibit high school students from working at after-school jobs during the school year.*

*1 – Determine your position on this proposal.*

*2 – In a persuasive essay, present your opinion and provide specific examples to support it.*

Here is the anchor paper for the 4 score point in its entirety:

When considering the recent proposal of the Legislature that would prohibit high school students from working during the school year, I am extremely concerned. I am a high school senior, am very involved in extracurricular activities, am at the top of my class, and I also hold a management position at a women’s shoe store. This last privilege should not be taken away from me or any other high schooler.

First of all, a part-time job teaches responsibility, social skills, and time-management. In order to hold a job, one must work hard and be accountable for their actions. I, at least, have seen a decline in these qualities among my peers and in today’s society. Also, in a job, one must interact with different groups of people. This would only enhance the school’s effort to teach social skills. Time management is also a necessary thing to learn during the high school years. In my position at work, I would fire anyone who could not maintain this skill in our place of employment.

Understand that some would say a job would take away time spent of academics. I say both can be done. Besides my school hours, I am involved in church, forensics, literary magazine, community service, and a ten-to-fifteen hour-a-week job. All of these combined make a well rounded person.

The money made from jobs also enables high schoolers to support school activities, leadership opportunities, and new experiences. All of these things, as

we know, cost money. Without a source of income there are many families and highschoolers who would miss out on these vital and exciting things.

Because I see so many benefits from an outside job I believe it would be a great disadvantage to high schoolers today to take away their right to work. It is my hope that our Legislature will weigh things closely and make the correct decision – to allow the working of high schoolers in outside jobs.

This paper, clearly, has some strengths: it is focused, clear, well structured, and relatively free of glaring errors. Indeed, with the exception of voice, the paper succeeds on all six traits. At the same time, it relies on what some writing teachers call “glittering generalities” – and the writer seems to know it: “I, at least, have seen a decline in these qualities among my peers and in today’s society.” It is also predictable and unoriginal. While the author clearly has a facility with language, we find little evidence here of complex ideas supported by rich and engaging details, or sophisticated analysis, reflection, or insight. It is the kind of writing that college and university teachers routinely bemoan: a five-paragraph theme that doesn’t say much, but says it well. It is, in a word, “schooled” prose.

The next example, which received the highest possible score on the same prompt (8; *exemplary*), offers an even better portrait of mostly vacuous, formulaic writing. It, too, is part of the 2001 scoring guide.

### After School Employment

The Nebraska Legislature is considering a bill that would prohibit high school students from working at after-school jobs during the school year. I am against this proposal because after-school jobs provide work experience for future jobs, teach students to manage time, and give students the opportunity to use money wisely.

First, I am against this proposal because it takes away from work experience for future jobs. Many of the basic job skills come from part-time jobs that took place while that person was in high school. If this bill was passed, students would not receive the hands-on experience required in professional or non-professional job areas.

Secondly, I am against this proposal because part-time jobs teach students to manage their time wisely. Many students hold after-school jobs and receive very good grades in school. I put in about 20 hours a week after school at my job, and I still manage to be top ranked in my class. After-school jobs tell students to work harder at homework while in school, because their out-of-school time will be spent at work.

Finally, I am against this proposal because after-school jobs give students the opportunity to use money wisely. Some students get jobs because they want to save money for college. Other students want to buy a new vehicle and need a source of income. By setting financial goals, an after school job can help accomplish these goals if the students decides to spend and save their money wisely.

All in all, I am against the proposal because it takes away experience from students in high school who are looking forward to a college education or have set

financial goals for themselves. An after-school job teaches students skills that are necessary in the work force.

Again, this piece of writing is focused, clear, and carefully organized. It is an almost perfect example of a five-paragraph theme, complete with an introduction that includes a three-part thesis statement; predictable transitions (“First,” “Secondly,” “Finally,” “All in all”); three body paragraphs; and a conclusion that summarizes the argument. Once again, with the exception of voice (which, curiously, is not discussed in the commentary accompanying either sample), this essay indeed satisfies the six traits.

But while the writer shows a certain facility with language, the writing is facile. Generality builds upon generality: “Many of the basic job skills come from part-time jobs that took place while that person was in high school. If this bill was passed, students would not receive the hands-on experience required in professional or non-professional job areas.” Which skills? How do they “come from” those jobs? What experience? Are skills and experience the same thing? (And are skills mentioned here different from or inclusive of the ones covered in the following two paragraphs?) Why would passage of the bill – which would prohibit working at after-school jobs only during the school year – mean students would not get working experience?

The essay provides precious little “evidence” to support its argument, relying instead on generalities based on logic. But that logic is sometimes questionable. The final sentence of the third paragraph, for instance, seems to unravel the argument presented in that paragraph: “After-school jobs tell students to work harder at homework while in school, because their out-of-school time will be spent at work.” First of all, this sentence bluntly states that students with after-school jobs *will not do homework at home* – an argument not likely to win many readers. But it also makes a logical leap: If students cannot do homework at home, then they will work harder to get it done in school. This is a dubious assumption at best, and not one on which many people would be willing to stake a legislative policy.

Similarly, the next paragraph claims that “after-school jobs give students the opportunity to use money wisely.” While this is logically tenable, it is also true that such jobs may give students the opportunity to use money *unwisely*. Perhaps recognizing this, the writer offers two examples: saving for college and buying a vehicle. Most readers are likely to agree that the first is wise, and that the second may or may not be wise, depending on circumstances. Again, perhaps sensing a drift in the argument, the writer ends the paragraph with a somewhat convoluted rewriting of the first sentence: “By setting financial goals, an after-school job can help accomplish these goals *if the students decides to spend and save their money wisely*.” The grammar of the sentence is telling: the writer seems to recognize in mid-sentence that it is not the job that accomplishes these goals, but the student, who at any rate may or may not spend and save his/her money wisely. At best, then, readers are left with a seriously qualified version of the argument – and at worst, they are left perplexed.

In our analysis of this essay, we have referred several times to “readers.” It must be noted, however, that students writing to this prompt do not have a specific audience in mind – and this is precisely the problem. Because writers do not have an identified audience, they cannot ask, “What arguments will seem most tenable to these readers? Which example will be most effective for them?” Instead, they must aim for a kind of

all-purpose prose, and a superficial logic that they think will appeal to a “general reader” (whoever that is). This is a serious handicap; the concept of “general reader” does not help much when writing about concrete (if fictional) policies. Students might reasonably wonder why a writer would write a “persuasive essay” about this topic in the first place – rather than, say, an article for the student newspaper, a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, or a letter to a legislator.

Again, the kind of writing held up here as exemplary is exactly what most postsecondary writing teachers do *not* want their students to write. In fact, many college teachers set the explicit goal of helping their students to *unlearn* the five-paragraph theme in their first-year writing courses. And it is not difficult to understand why: this form of writing seriously limits students’ intellectual work by stressing structure over content and “clean prose” over critical thinking.

As we close this section of our report, we wish to stress that these are policy-based limitations, and not the responsibility of NDE staff. Coordinator of Statewide Writing Assessment Sue Anderson has done an especially admirable job, within existing policy constraints, in promoting responsible writing instruction and providing valuable professional development to teachers around the state. There is also no question that the SWA has performed a valuable service; more teachers are paying attention to writing, and more teachers are “buying in” to the Six Trait approach.

However, as writing researcher George Hillocks, Jr. observes in his recent book *The Testing Trap*, more attention to writing is only a boon if expectations for writing are high enough, and if writing is being taught *well*. Absent these conditions, the effects of increased attention on students’ writing and thinking may in fact be deleterious, in which case *less* attention to writing in schools might be preferable.

We do not believe that expectations *are* high enough at present. As for whether writing is being taught well, it is not yet clear what methods of writing instruction are being promoted by the SWA. According to writing researchers such as Hillocks and Martin Nystrand, most language arts classrooms in the country that maintain a pedagogical focus on what we have called “schooled” exposition – purportedly all-purpose prose – tend to emphasize lecture and rote skills-building exercises (researchers call this approach, which is dominant throughout the country, “current-traditional rhetoric”). A growing bloc of teachers, however, is moving to “expressivist” instruction, in which students are encouraged to find and develop their voices through lots of low-stakes writing, “workshops” in which they share their writing with peer readers as well as teachers, and careful attention to the writing process. A third group, which is smaller than the others but also growing, is termed “epistemic,” and it emphasizes structured, deliberative classroom discussion, critical inquiry into matters of social import, and scaffolded learning tasks to develop strategies for encountering new situations or rhetorical contexts. According to an extensive research review, Hillocks found that current-traditional rhetoric (CTR) is the least effective pedagogical method. In fact, expressivist approaches proves eight to nine times greater than CTR, and epistemic approaches proved 22 times greater (*Research*). At present, we do not know which approach is most prevalent in Nebraska classrooms, and which specific methods are viewed as particularly amenable to the SWA. Methods of writing instruction will be one of our research focuses for the coming year.

We also hope to gauge the readiness of the state's teachers for a more complex, rigorous approach to writing assessment. Such an approach would do more than offer a single "snapshot" of the kind of text students can produce under highly artificial conditions, and would reward critical thinking and sound reasoning rather than formulaic writing. It would generate a more nuanced portrait of students' writing ability by, for instance, soliciting a portfolio of their writing over time (as is now done in several states). Such a move would not necessarily sacrifice consistency in procedures or scoring. Portfolio systems used by some states, in fact, use common rubrics and much the same training procedures adopted in Nebraska. Such a move would also be supported by current writing assessment research and the professional standards of organizations such as the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Consider, for instance, the following statements:

*From CCCC's "Writing Assessment: A Position Statement":*

- ◆ language is always learned and used most effectively in environments where it accomplishes something the user wants to accomplish for particular listeners or readers (431)
- ◆ any individual's writing 'ability' is a sum of a variety of skills employed in a diversity of contexts, and individual ability fluctuates unevenly among these varieties (432)

*From IRA/NCTE's "Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing":*

- ◆ the assessment process should involve multiple perspectives and multiple sources of data (29)
- ◆ assessment must be based in the school community (33)

Finally, as this last point reminds us, moving to a more complex writing assessment would bring the SWA more in line with the philosophy of STARS by promoting a more fluid integration of classroom teaching and assessment.

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## **Chapter 4**

### **Language Arts Assessment**

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#### **Research Design**

Districts were chosen randomly for broad representation, and most of the district language arts assessment surveys were given to building principals or other administrators to distribute in teachers' mailboxes. The surveys were included with packets that also contained a stamped envelope addressed to the UNL researchers and a cover letter explaining the purpose of the survey and stating that Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission had been obtained to conduct the survey. The survey included questions on demographic information, as well as on familiarity with the assessment, changes in classroom teaching practices, changes in classroom assessment practices, preparing students for the district assessments, effects of the assessments on communication within the school and community, the influence of the district assessment development on teachers' knowledge of assessment, and teachers' attitudes toward the district assessments and their development (see Appendix C). These topics will be addressed separately in the sections below.

#### **Demographic Information**

***Teachers represented grades K-12, with more elementary level (76%) than middle/ secondary level (24%) responding. The table below shows the number of teachers in each grade that returned surveys.***

Grades Taught by Survey Respondents

<b>Grades</b>	<b>Number of Teachers</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
I. Kindergarten	10	
5.5		
1	22	12.0
2-3	48	26.2
4-6	59	32.3
7-8	18	9.8
7-12	3	1.6
9-12	23	12.6
<i>Total</i>	<i>183</i>	<i>100.0</i>

**Years of teaching experience reported by teachers ranged from 1 to 38, with an average of 20.7 years.**

Findings

*Familiarity with District and Nationally Normed Assessments*

**Teachers were asked about their involvement in the district assessment processes. The most frequent form of involvement was in aligning curriculum to the state standards (47%), followed by scoring of assessments (42%), and development of the assessments (41.5%). Fewer teachers reported involvement in remediation activities following the assessments (20.8%) or putting together the district’s assessment portfolio (20.8%).**

Teachers were asked several questions regarding their level of familiarity with both their district’s language arts assessments and with the norm-referenced tests (NRTs) used by their district. When asked about their familiarity with their district’s language arts assessments, 89% of the teachers reported being “quite a bit” or “extremely” familiar. Only 1 teacher reported being “minimally” familiar with the assessments. Most teachers (84.1%) reported that the content of their instruction was “quite” or “extremely” similar to the district assessments. In contrast, only 43.1% of the teachers responded in a similar fashion when asked about similarity of their instruction to NRTs.

Teachers were somewhat divided with regard to whether they thought the district assessment measured what their students really knew and could do. 56% of the teachers responded that district assessments did so “quite a bit” or “extremely well” while 39.6% recorded answers of “somewhat.” Only 4.4% of teachers responded “minimally” or “not at all.” When asked the same question with reference to the NRTs used by their districts, the majority (52.7%) responded “somewhat” with 19.4% answering “minimally” or “not at all” and the remaining 27.3% responding “quite a bit” or “extremely well.”

Teachers were also asked about the degree to which they felt both district and NRTs were useful for the purposes of evaluating student progress, assessing their teaching effectiveness, and planning their instruction. Responses to these questions are summarized in the table below. As can be seen in the table, teachers were more positive about the utility of their district assessments than of NRTs with regard to the importance of these in evaluating their students’ progress, assessing their own teaching effectiveness, and planning their instruction.

**Teacher Responses to Questions about Importance of District Assessments and NRTs**

<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Not at all/Minimally</b>	<b>Somewhat</b>	<b>Quite a Bit</b>	<b>Extremely</b>
<b>District Assessments</b>				
Evaluating Student Progress	7.2	31.5	39.8	21.5
Assessing Teaching Effectiveness	11.5	33.0	37.4	18.1
Planning Instruction	4.3	18.1	47.3	30.2
<b>NRTs</b>				
Evaluating Student Progress	25.9	48.8	22.9	2.4

<i>Assessing Teaching Effectiveness</i>	<b>32.4</b>	<b>43.1</b>	<b>21.6</b>	<b>3.0</b>
<i>Planning Instruction</i>	27.3	44.2	20.6	7.9

*Note: Numbers in the table represent the percentage of teachers giving that response for that question.*

### ***Changes in Classroom Practices***

One series of questions asked teachers whether they put more, less, or the same amount of emphasis on various classroom activities since the introduction of their district’s language arts assessments. Answers to this series of questions are summarized in the table below.

Teacher Responses to Questions about Changes in Classroom Practices				
Instructional Activity	More emphasis	Same Emphasis	Less Emphasis	#
<b>Responding</b>				
II. Basic Reading Skills	33.9	65.0		
1.1				177
Basic Writing Skills	62.8	36.1	1.1	180
Small Group Instruction	28.4	65.9	5.7	176
Cooperative Learning	6.3	77.0	16.7	174
Reading for Understanding	33.7	66.3	0.0	178
Vocabulary Lists	24.9	64.7	10.4	173
Activities Involving Critical Thinking	29.4	65.0	5.6	180
Word Recognition Skills	24.4	70.5	5.1	176
Sustained Silent Reading	25.6	66.3	8.1	172
Direct Instruction to Whole Class	15.3	81.8	2.8	176
Library Projects and Report Writing	28.5	59.4	12.1	165
Integration of Different Subject Areas	23.2	68.4	8.5	177
Language Arts Skills Not Tested	2.3	56.3	40.8	174
Class Discussions of Readings	14.8	76.1	9.1	176
Activities Similar to those on District				
<b><u>Assessments</u></b>	<b>50.8</b>	<b>48.0</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>179</b>
Worksheets (elementary only)	10.3	65.0	24.8	117

*Note: Numbers in the table represent the percentage of teachers giving each response.*

The largest numbers of teachers reported increasing their emphasis on basic writing skills and “activities similar to those on the district assessments” since the implementation of their district’s language arts assessments, probably reflecting a desire to give students practice on the district language arts assessments and on the state writing assessment. However, teachers reported putting the same or more emphasis on most of the practices listed. This may well lead one to wonder what activities were sacrificed in order that more time be devoted to the activities listed. Almost 41% of the teachers reported putting less emphasis on “language arts skills that are not tested.” Other activities with relatively large percentages reporting less emphasis were “Cooperative learning” and “Vocabulary lists,” and “Library projects and report writing.” Among elementary school teachers, nearly 25% reported placing less emphasis on the use of worksheets.

III. Test Administration and Preparation Practices

IV. Teachers were asked several questions regarding various test administration practices that might be used to improve test scores, including “providing hints on correct answers,” “answering questions during testing time about test content,” “not administering the test to students who might have trouble on the test,” and “practicing items from the test itself.” In general, teachers reported little use of these practices. The practice teachers believed to be used most frequently was “practicing items from the test itself,” with 10.4% of the teachers responding that they believed this was done “frequently” and 29.6% responding “occasionally.” However, it should be noted that in many districts everyday classroom activities are used as assessments, so teachers may simply have been reporting on this practice. On the other hand, 29% of the teachers reported that they felt “providing hints on correct answers” was used “occasionally” while 21% reported they believed that teachers “answered questions during testing time about test content” occasionally. These responses may indicate that testing practices are not as well standardized as they might be.

With regard to testing accommodations, 89% of the teachers felt that the testing accommodations made for students in Special Education were “very” or “somewhat” reasonable, while 71.4% gave these responses with regard to accommodations for English Language Learners. However, some teachers were not as sanguine regarding this issue. The percentages of teachers responding that the accommodations made in their district were “not at all” reasonable were 10.4% for Special Education and 27.6% for ELL. In weighing this information, it should be noted that some of the written comments provided by teachers indicated that they were considering NRTs at least in part when answering this question, so the degree to which the responses reported here reflect *only* teachers’ feelings about accommodations for their district assessments is not clear.

Several questions on the survey dealt with teachers’ test preparation practices. Teachers were asked whether they used several commonly used test preparation strategies. The results are summarized in the table below:

**Teachers’ Responses to Questions about Test Preparation Strategies**

V.	<u>Strategy</u>	
VI.	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
No special test preparation	90.2	9.8
Teach test-taking skills	37.7	62.3
Encourage students to work hard and prepare	32.2	67.8
Teach skills known to be on the test	21.3	78.7
Provide test-specific preparation materials	67.2	32.8
Use items similar to those on district assessments in class	21.9	78.1

*Note: Numbers in the table represent percentages of teachers. N for all questions = 183.*

As can be seen from the table, the majority of teachers reported using all preparation methods except for providing test-specific preparation materials. It may be that teachers did not consider it necessary to provide such materials, as focus groups in which these issues were discussed revealed that most teachers felt their classroom instruction provided sufficient instruction on tested skills. The strategies reported by the largest

percentages of teachers were teaching skills known to be on the test (78.7%) and using items similar to those on the districts assessments in classroom work (78.1%), indicating that use of the district assessments has likely had some influence on teachers' classroom practices.

#### Communication with Constituencies

Teachers were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt introduction of the district language arts assessments had improved their communication with various constituencies. Teachers were most positive about improvements in communication with other language arts teachers and with students, with only about 17% and 18%, respectively, reporting no improvement for these groups. Improvement in communication with parents and with administrators was rated only slightly less positively, with about 24% and 25%, respectively, reporting no improvement with these groups. Communication with the school board and with the local community received the highest percentages of teachers indicating no improvement (51.6% and 46%, respectively). This is not surprising, as communication with these constituencies is accomplished differently across districts.

#### Learning More about Assessment

One expected result of STARS was that teachers would become more expert in assessment methods. Consequently, teachers were asked a series of questions about whether they had learned more about various aspects of assessment as a result of the implementation of their district's language arts assessments. Teachers responded most positively to the following statements:

- ◆ The introduction of my district's language arts assessments has helped me learn more about assessment. (73.1% chose either agree or strongly agree).
- ◆ I think that the use of rubrics clarifies the expectations of an assignment. (78.1% responded either agree or strongly agree)
- ◆ The district assessments helped me to think about how to use classroom activities to focus on important skills. (69.8% chose agree or strongly agree).

At least 50% of the teachers responded "agree" or "strongly agree" to the following statements:

- ◆ Since the introduction of my district's language arts assessments I use rubrics more often in my own assessments. (58.5%)
- ◆ Since the introduction of my district's language arts assessments I am more careful to give clear instructions to students. (57.8%)
- ◆ I learned how to assess student skills more effectively as a result of my district's language arts assessments. (50%)

- ◆ Since the introduction of my district's language arts assessments I have tried to create assignments that focus more on the application of knowledge.

Finally, teachers reported least agreement with the following statement:

- ◆ I am able to grade homework and tests more objectively as a result of the knowledge I gained from district language arts assessments. (35.6% chose agree or strongly agree)

It should be noted that written comments by teachers as well as focus groups revealed that many teachers were already using assessment methods such as rubrics, and for this reason did not feel that they had increased their use of this method or learned more about it as a result of the introduction of district assessments. However, it is not clear how many teachers fall into this category.

### Feelings about Assessments

Teachers were asked to respond to a long series of statements regarding their feelings about various aspects of their district's language arts assessments. Two of these statements had to do with teacher's use of the assessment results. The vast majority of teachers reported that they would review material in class (87.8% chose agree or strongly agree) and modify their instruction (91.1% chose agree or strongly agree) in areas on which their students performed poorly on the district assessments.

With regard to the information teachers felt their district assessments provided, the majority of teachers felt that the assessments were helpful in identifying students' strengths and weaknesses (66.5% chose agree or strongly agree), but fewer teachers felt that the assessments gave them important feedback about how well they were teaching (45.9% chose agree or strongly agree). Less than half (44.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that their district's language arts assessments were helping their schools to improve, and most teachers felt that they had a pretty good idea about what students knew without using the district assessments (82% chose agree or strongly agree). Teachers were divided on the issue of whether the district assessments could "influence teachers to go against their ideals of good educational practice," with 47.2% choosing agree or strongly agree, 22.2% neutral, and 30.6% choosing disagree or strongly disagree.

Several of the statements in this section had to do with districts' remediation practices for students who did not do well on the assessments. Overall, teachers did not seem to feel their districts were doing a sufficient job in this area. Only 28% of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that "low scores on the assessments help get additional resources to students with the greatest learning needs," while 55.5% agreed or strongly agreed that their districts should "do more to help students who do not do well on the district language arts assessments." Only 38.5% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that "the remediation programs provided by my district are effective."

One comment heard often in teacher focus groups was that the development of district language arts assessments had resulted in a more uniform district

curriculum in this area and had “put everyone on the same page.” Teachers responding to the survey tended to agree with this notion. Fifty-five percent of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that “the district assessments have resulted in a more uniform language arts curriculum in our district,” while 55.2% agreed or strongly agreed that “the district assessments have helped teachers to form collective goals.”

Finally, teachers were asked whether they felt that their students were motivated to do well on the assessments, and whether students seemed anxious about taking the assessments. When these questions were asked in teacher focus groups, teachers seemed to agree that those students who were generally motivated and/or anxious in evaluative situations continued to be that way when taking the district assessments, while those who did not usually display anxiety or who were not usually well-motivated maintained these characteristics. Results from the teachers responding to the survey did not contradict this picture. Responses to these statements were fairly well divided. In response to the statement “My students are motivated to do well on the district language arts assessments” 39.7% agreed or strongly agreed, 35.8% were neutral, and 24.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Responses to the statement “My students are anxious about taking the district language arts assessments” were similarly divided with 28.5% agreeing or strongly agreeing, 38% neutral, and 33.5% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

*[Note: This section is written by Dr. Gallagher.]*

Many of the results of Dr. Bandalos’ survey are consistent with findings in other sections of this study. Specifically, her research indicates that

- ◆ many teachers are aligning curriculum and standards, and developing and scoring assessments, but few participate in the development of their District Assessment Portfolio;
- ◆ tested knowledge and skills are taught knowledge and skills;
- ◆ teachers are devoting more instructional attention to writing;
- ◆ some teachers are concerned about SPED/ELL accommodations;
- ◆ STARS is improving communication between teachers and among teachers and students, and teachers are getting on “the same page”;
- ◆ teachers are becoming more assessment literate.

All of these findings are consistent with our research on the District Assessment Portfolio system, the Statewide Writing Assessment, and leadership.

This section of the study also reveals teachers' perceptions of district-generated assessments. Importantly, Bandalos has found that

- ◆ teachers are more aware of and their instruction is more aligned with district assessments than with norm-referenced tests;
- ◆ teachers believe district tests are better measures of what students know and can do than are norm-referenced tests; and
- ◆ teachers believe that district assessments are more instructionally useful than are norm-referenced tests.

Clearly, district assessments are having a powerful impact on what is taught in Nebraska's Language Arts classrooms. In terms of instructional practice, we find little evidence of major shifts of emphasis, with the already-noted exception of increased focus on writing skills. It may be too early to identify major changes in classroom practice, other than the predictable emphasis on knowledge and skills that are assessed. It may also be the case that local assessments are growing out of instructional practice, and so there is little need to make radical changes in classroom instruction. This will be a research focus for this project in coming years.

There is evidence here to suggest that district assessments could be better (this is also consistent with findings of the DAP section of the study). First, although the majority of teachers believe that assessments provide useful diagnostic information about student learning, less than half believe that their district assessments are improving schools. The vast majority, in fact, believe that they do not need their district assessments to judge their students' learning. Second, teachers also reported that students who do not perform well on the assessments are not getting the kind of remedial help they need. So while student needs are being identified, they are now, on the whole, being addressed in systematic ways. This leads us to the first of our **recommendations**:

- 1) *Assist districts in using their assessment information to systematically target students who need extra help.* Identifying areas of need, of course, is not enough; those needs must be remediated. Some districts, of course, are doing just this, and they may be enlisted to guide the work of other districts in creating programs to get students the help they need to be successful learners. The perception of the researchers, however, is that districts across the state have a great deal of work to do in addressing needs they are just identifying for the first time.
- 2) *Promote more teacher participation in DAP development and assembly.* These survey findings reinforce the finding in other sections of the report that teachers generally are not involved in DAP development and assembly, even while they create and sometimes score the assessments. In a truly teacher-led system, teachers will have a hand in each phase of the STARS process, including determining what the "final project" (the DAP) will look like. Teachers should

not remain unaware of the six Quality Criteria, for example, as we found in our DAP interviews. More districts should be advised to create DAP committees, composed mainly of teachers and with rotating membership, which are responsible for seeing the process through, from instruction to assessment to reporting.

- 3) *Maintain focus on local assessments, not national, norm-referenced exams.* Teachers clearly prefer local assessments to NRTs, and they report a much closer alignment between their instruction and those local assessments. We would observe that the best local assessments emerge from local instruction, rather than the other way around. One of our research focuses in coming years will be to determine more precisely the relationship between instruction and assessment.

## ***Chapter 5*** ***Leadership***

In this chapter, we report on the leadership demonstrated by both *state* and *district* leaders of school improvement. Our aim in this section of the study was to answer questions such as the following:

- ◆ What kind of leadership does STARS require, at both the state and local levels?
- ◆ How is STARS changing state and local leadership?
- ◆ How are state and local leaders responding to new demands?
- ◆ What challenges remain for state and local leaders of STARS?

We begin with state leadership.

### State Leadership for School Improvement

#### **Research Design**

During the past year, we have attended approximately 25 NDE-sponsored events related to school improvement, including

- ◆ *meetings* of the Commissioner's STARS Advisory Committee, the Statewide Writing Assessment Task Force; and the Models Assessment Committee;
- ◆ *trainings and workshops* held by the Coordinator of Assessment, the Coordinator of Statewide Writing, the Buros Institute for Testing, and assessment consultant Rick Stiggins; and
- ◆ *presentations* by the Commissioner or his staff at Nebraska's P-16 (pre-kindergarten through college) conferences; community forums; and the State Board of Education.

At each of these events, we have taken detailed notes and collected artifacts: handouts, trainings packets, evaluations, and the like. At times (e.g., in STARS Advisory Committee meetings), we have been participant-observers; at other times (e.g., at the Buros Institute's training session for portfolio reviewers), we have merely observed.

We have also collected and analyzed numerous additional artifacts – videos of broadcasts and teleconferences, meeting minutes, training packets and evaluations, correspondence from NDE to districts, NDE planning documents, the STARS website, the State of the School Report, the STARS Updates, and so on.

Finally, we have conducted several informal interviews with Coordinator of State Assessment Pat Roschewski and Coordinator of Statewide Writing Assessment Sue Anderson. These interviews took place throughout the year, and generally consisted of requests from researchers for information or clarification.

### **Findings**

We suggested in the introduction that NDE's approach to leadership for school improvement is unique in its emphasis on building commitment and capacity, not merely exacting compliance. Perhaps the most striking feature of NDE's leadership is its modeling of the kind of teaching and learning it hopes to promote. When it comes to STARS, in other words, NDE is not merely an administrative organization; it is also a teaching and learning organization. Commissioner Christensen and his staff view themselves as partners with other sponsors of learning, not simply managers. We can trace this approach across several significant areas of the state's leadership work:

- ◆ vision-building;
- ◆ involving local educators and administrators;
- ◆ investing in professional development;
- ◆ educating all stakeholders; and
- ◆ partnering with higher education.

### **Vision-building**

At the heart of STARS is a vision of school improvement centered on local discretion; multiple, balanced assessments; and teacher leadership. To be sure, this vision has its skeptics inside and outside the state, as the Commissioner and his staff well know. In this context, vision-building – which we define as the process of inviting others to identify shared commitments and develop plans for acting on those commitments – becomes crucial to the well-being of the system.

In our observations of NDE presentations, workshops, and trainings, as well as our analyses of STARS-related documents, we have noted the following consistent leadership strategies relevant to vision-building:

- 1) *Focusing first on “the why.”* Each school improvement presentation, workshop, training, or meeting that we have attended has begun with the “big picture”: a clear, concise, and always impassioned rationale for Nebraska's unique route to school improvement. Commissioner Christensen typically opens such events with a few “talking points” that illustrate the values and commitments that underlie the work at hand. As part of his presentation to the sixteen District Assessment Portfolio reviewers in June 2002, for instance, Christensen described his vision of accountability *as* school improvement, and he reiterated his insistence that assessments must be instructionally useful *first and above all*. He also reminded reviewers that it was the state's job to generate ratings, not rankings. Although the reviewers would get a thorough training from the Buros staff, the Commissioner wanted to ensure that they could place their work in the broader context of the state's school renewal efforts.

NDE has also touts its vision near and far. Its representatives regularly articulate the philosophical underpinnings of STARS in national presentations and publications, as well as locally – in its series of STARS Updates (which are periodically mailed to schools), for instance, and on its regularly updated website (<http://www.nde.state.ne.us/>).

- 2) *Soliciting others' visions and inviting dialogue.* Although state leadership firmly believes its approach is, as the Commissioner is fond of saying, the “right thing” for the “right reasons,” it also understands that if it is to have significant long-lasting effects, NDE’s vision must be integrated into the personal visions of those who are asked to enact it. And the first step in this process is soliciting those personal visions and inviting dialogue about which values, assumptions, beliefs, and commitments are shared, and which are not. Each STARS-related event we have attended involves significant “vision work,” typically including free-wheeling discussion and collaborative activities. NDE’s use of Rick Stiggins’ work on assessment literacy is particularly relevant here, as Stiggins’ approach emphasizes the examination of belief systems about assessment and learning. Coordinator of Assessment Pat Roschewski is also skilled in soliciting others’ visions. At the center of Roschewski’s workshops with teachers is almost always the question, “What do we believe about teaching, learning, and assessment?” And like Stiggins, she follows up with this: “How can we build assessments that enact those beliefs?” As we will detail below, NDE has also created numerous forums for teacher and administrator feedback and advice, and these forums, too, provide an opportunity to share and collaboratively build a vision of education in Nebraska.
- 3) *Keeping local values at the center.* NDE passes up no opportunity to emphasize that STARS, ultimately, is about improving local practice. We see this commitment, for instance, in the careful selection of assessment models, which represent every conceivable school situation. We also see it in the department’s considerable efforts in helping districts analyze their data and “prepare their message” for local media and community members. On November 7, 2001, for instance, just before the release of the state Report Card, NDE staff and local leaders held a video teleconference aimed at helping districts interpret and frame their results locally. As he had in countless other forums, Christensen reminded viewers that rank-ordering districts “undermines everything we want to do.” On the other hand, he posed several comparisons – between like schools, for instance – that *were* reasonable. But above all, he insisted, the data generated by STARS should be used a springboard for community conversations and a foundation for future improvement. NDE staff followed up the Commissioner’s comments by framing the importance of districts’ “demographic context” in shaping the message and showing viewers how to access and navigate the online state of the school report. Finally, local leaders shared their work in preparing their own message, again emphasizing community conversations and data-driven planning. This broadcast, which echoed the themes established during the August 2001 Administrator Days (devoted to “what to do with data”), demonstrates the state’s commitment to serving the interests of districts.

VII.

VIII. Involving local educators and administrators

An old joke has it that a leader without followers is just out for a walk. Likewise, without the support and expertise of local educators, STARS is *only* a vision, an unfulfilled idea/l. This is perhaps true of all school renewal efforts, but especially so for one that professes to be “school-based” and “teacher-led.” NDE recognizes this principle, and honors it in several sites:

- 1) *Advisory committees composed largely of local educators and administrators.* The engine behind NDE’s decision-making is the counsel of numerous ad hoc and standing committees, which generally include teachers and local administrators from a variety of regions and school sizes. As of June 2001, for instance, the SWA Task Force consisted of 6 teachers, 3 ESU staff developers, 3 principals, 1 superintendent, 4 district staff personnel, and 2 higher education representatives. The Model Assessment and Data Collection committees boast similar numbers. The exception seems to be the STARS Advisory Committee, which is geared toward leadership, local and state. If STARS is indeed a teacher-led system, however, perhaps the membership of this group should be expanded beyond its current group of administrators, staff developers, NDE staff, and higher education representatives.
- 2) *Forums designed expressly to solicit feedback.* In Chapter 2, we mentioned an email exchange that the Commissioner and his staff initiated in Fall 2001 with teachers and administrators across the state. Similarly, Coordinator of Statewide Assessment Pat Roschewski conducts an online question-and-answer forum (accessible through the NDE website) in which any teacher or administrator around the state may ask a question or make a comment. Perhaps the most intense feedback-gathering efforts, however, have been the “Policy Partner Forums,” which were held in Omaha, Lincoln, Kearney, and Scottsbluff in January 2002. Each forum consisted of between 55 and 70 participants, with strong representation of teachers, district and ESU staff developers, local administrators, local board members and community members, state board members, and legislators (or their representatives). Participants were mixed into groups and asked to address two questions: 1) *How do we use data to energize the school improvement process?* and 2) *What do we need to engage all of the stakeholders in the school improvement process?* We take up responses to these questions in Chapter 6, as they reinforce some of the findings of this study. For now, it is important to note that a broad array of stakeholders was assembled across the state in order to provide feedback for how to move the school improvement process forward.
- 3) *Interactive workshops and trainings.* It is notable that very little of the professional development undertaken by NDE is delivered via the traditional inservice model. As we have already suggested, without exception, the NDE-sponsored events we have attended are interactive, with numerous opportunities for attendees to ask questions, to participate in dialogue, and to work together in

groups. Every workshop or training is treated as a working session, and the emphasis is always on walking away with something concrete. As we indicated above, Rick Stiggins designs heavily interactive workshops. In fact, evaluations from the Training of Trainers workshops in February 2001 praised Stiggins for his focus on team-building, modeling, and constant interaction. Attendees appreciated the opportunity to work with their team members during the workshop itself, and to come away from the workshop with a concrete plan. Spring “data retreats,” which NDE co-sponsors with ESUs, work in a similar fashion, typically culminating in group-generated “action plans” which will guide district representatives’ uses of data.

STARS, then, is not being “delivered” to staff; it is being co-constructed by local educators and state leaders. Perhaps because most of those who lead STARS at the state level – including the Commissioner, the Coordinator of Assessment, and the Coordinator of Statewide Writing Assessment – were long-time teachers, STARS is viewed not as something to do *to* or *for* teachers, but rather something to build *with* them.

### **Investing in professional development**

Ultimately, it is not enough simply to *involve* local teachers and administrators in STARS; NDE must also *invest* in those stakeholders, consistently providing them with the tools they will need to carry out their expanded professional responsibilities: expertise, funding, and moral support.

1) *Expertise.* NDE has conducted and co-sponsored with ESUs a variety of trainings and workshops. The bulk of its commitment to professional development regarding assessment is devoted to “STAR grants,” a program that began with Goals 2000 funding and continues with federal funds today. STAR grants are awarded to local districts to develop local assessments, and are accompanied by assessment workshops and guidance from NDE on forming learning teams. Between 1999 and 2002, according to the department’s “Summative Report on STAR Grants,” NDE partnered with 18 ESUs to create 535 learning teams composed of 2,111 participants. It also ran reading assessment workshops attended by 6,873 participants, writing assessment workshops attended by 6,000 participants, and mathematics, science, and social studies assessment workshops attended by 5,672 participants. All of these workshops received positive evaluations from participants. In 2000, for instance, local school administrators gave the workshops an average ranking of 4.35 on a five-point satisfaction scale. Comments included the following:

- ◆ “The assessments developed were research based and teacher created. The assessments will provide valuable data.”
- ◆ “The assessment pieces produced by the staff are excellent. As the teachers use the assessments this year, they are very aware of the quality criteria due to the quality assessment training.”

- ◆ “The project provided the time and money for the learning teams to learn new skill and implement into practice student centered classroom assessment.”
- ◆ “We thought only a few [teachers] would do the work but we learned that many teachers need the involvement. This was good! It created a good mass of ownership.”

The 500 or so teachers trained to rate student writing for the Statewide Writing Assessment in three regional sites had similar things to say about the training provided by Coordinator Sue Anderson and her staff. Evaluations from the sessions praised the training as “professional,” “inspiring,” “clear,” and “excellent.” Teachers also saw the training and rating as a significant professional development opportunity:

- ◆ “I’ve learned so much.”
- ◆ “Experience very beneficial to my professional career.”
- ◆ “Thanks for the opportunity to be part of history!”
- ◆ “I love being able to learn something new to make myself a better teacher.”
- ◆ “It was like a renewal for me.”

These comments are excerpted from those offered at all three training sites. In each case, the responses to the trainings were overwhelmingly positive. The only regular criticism was that the training was too long and sometimes redundant.

NDE and ESUs also have sponsored Trait Writing Workshops across the state (in 2000, they were held in Ogallala, Holdrege, and Wakefield; in 2001, they were held in Lincoln, Hastings, and Scottsbluff). These are in addition to SWA planning workshops and SWA scoring workshops for ESU staff developers to assist with local scoring. In short, the SWA provides multiple significant opportunities for professional development, especially in the area of assessment literacy (this finding is supported by the research we report on in Chapter 3).

2) *Funding.* The plethora of workshops and trainings conducted each year by NDE demonstrates its willingness to invest in local educators. NDE’s most significant fiscal investment in local expertise is the STAR grants program, which annually awards \$3.6 million to districts. Returning for a moment to the “Summative Report on STAR Grants,” we find that in 2000, local administrators gave an average rating of 4.15 to indicate their satisfaction with the amount of funding available through STAR grants. Although many evaluation respondents noted that “we could always use more money,” and a few complained about how the

money was targeted (schools with smaller student populations, for instance, complained about receiving smaller amounts than did schools with larger populations), the majority found the funding adequate, even ample:

- ◆ “Providing educators with stipends as they work on CRAs [Criterion-Referenced Assessments] for Reading and Writing was critical to the success of the process. Funding was adequate and appropriate. The amount of the stipend...was also appropriate.”
- ◆ “The funding was crucial to the success of the project. The majority of work was carried out after contract hours and in the summer.”
- ◆ “The total dollars were ample. All teachers k-12 were involved.”
- ◆ “The STAR grant...encouraged the administration and staff by providing evidence that the state department recognizes the many hours and the collaboration that is necessary to [this] project and was willing to provide the funding. It encouraged everyone to participate in a positive manner because we felt strong support from the Nebraska Department of Education”

Of course, we are hearing here only from local administrators whose districts had applied for and received STAR grants. Our leadership survey, on which we report below, reveals that funding remains a serious challenge for many districts. Still, the number of participants and learning groups participating in the STAR grants program is impressive in a state of this size, and it is clear that NDE is working to recognize and reward the unprecedented expansion of educators’ professional purview.

- 3) *Moral Support.* Many interviewees in other sections of this study reported that the Commissioner and his staff, and especially Pat Roschewski, have been exceptionally responsive to their requests for information or assistance. Roschewski regularly visits schools, at their request, to help with capacity-building. As we have noted more than once, the Commissioner also makes himself available to answer teachers’ and administrators’ questions. NDE has also provided moral support in the form of creating an “honor roll of schools,” which includes districts with exemplary or very good ratings on their assessment quality and student performance. While this is a minor gesture, it demonstrates the state’s commitment to celebrating success. This is a key ingredient of what we think of as “high-impact” – as opposed to high-stakes – assessment: instead of punishing schools into compliance, NDE is endeavoring to reinforce and expand commitment to STARS, in part by making success stories more visible. The jury is still out on what effects this will have on other districts, but it may well lay the foundation for avoiding the kind of morale problems other states face among its teaching corps.

### Educating all stakeholders

Because STARS runs counter to prevailing educational thought, and because it aims to foster community conversations, one of the most significant of NDE's roles is to inform and educate various stakeholders across the state, not least of which are the media and community members.

- 1) *The Media.* It is clear that NDE, and especially Dr. Christensen, has taken great care in shaping the media's reporting of STARS. Early on, and particularly when the legislature was considering a single state test, the major newspapers were not generally enamored of Christensen's "school-based, teacher-led" vision. Recently, however, local newspapers, including the *Lincoln Journal-Star (LJS)*, have published laudatory editorials about STARS. In fact, in late 2001, *LJS* published a three-part series entitled "Making the Grade," profiling three districts' approaches to and perceptions of the system (Carlson, "Full Commitment," "Bad Grades," "District Sees"). On December 13, it published an editorial in which the editors maintained that "[t]he quality of discussion is improved immeasurably" as a result of STARS ("Report Card"). Along with the *Omaha World-Herald (OWH)* and the *Grand Island Independent*, *LJS* has also closely reported on and supported the Commissioner's handling of new federal requirements.

In addition, the *LJS* has endorsed the Statewide Writing Assessment, claiming in an August 3, 2001 editorial that the SWA has been useful in identifying groups of students whose writing needs special attention ("Statewide Tests"). The *OWH* is more skeptical, emphasizing the limitations of the test, including subjectivity, its "snapshot approach," differing demographics, and scoring exceptions (those who scored locally) ("Test Analysis"). Still, on the whole, the newspapers have been supportive of STARS, often giving the Commissioner voice in their pages and complying with his requests not to print simplistic district comparisons. Tracing their coverage of STARS over several years, it becomes evident that they have come to a clearer understanding of its philosophy and function. In a word, they have become educated about STARS.

The Commissioner and his staff have also crafted careful press briefings for the release of the report card, and orchestrated a well-organized press conference on November 9, 2001 unveiling the Report Card. This press conference moves us to our next category.

- 2) *Communities.* One of the Commissioner's main themes during the press conference was community dialogue. He viewed the press conference as an opportunity to educate the public about the meanings and uses of the information generated by STARS, emphasizing that "informed conversations, and informed decisions, are the heart and soul of democracy." He also sketched "the why," insisting that local discretion, decision-making, and leadership are right for Nebraska. He described district comparisons that were inappropriate, as well as some that are appropriate. And of course he framed the results, noting that 3 out of 4 students assessed are proficient in Language Arts standards; that 80% of Nebraska's students are in high-performing schools; and that more than 300

schools rate “very good” or better. Other speakers at the press conference included Governor Johanns, legislator Ron Raikes, State Board member Ann Mactier, and several local administrators and teachers who shared their experiences with STARS. The latter, especially, set the public agenda by focusing on how assessment helps them identify areas of strength and weakness; plan for incremental improvement; “raise the bar” of community dialogue; meet local students’ needs; and develop professionally. Although the speakers all emphasized that their assessment programs were “works in progress,” each also pointed to significant benefits already reaped from participation in STARS. And each stressed above all that assessment results provide an opportunity for communities to inform themselves about what is going on in schools and to rally around improved teaching and learning.

The Commissioner also writes a regular column for the “Homeroom” section of the *Lincoln Journal-Star*, and has participated in a number of community forums aimed at increasing awareness of STARS. In 2001, for instance, he spoke to parents at a NAACP Community Forum on Testing held at Lincoln High School. He also participated in a discussion with writer Susan Ohanian when she visited UNL to present her ideas about standards and assessment. Although these events were both in Lincoln, they were open to the public, and they demonstrate Christensen’s commitment to engaging in the community conversations he espouses. However, while NDE has taken some steps to educate the public about STARS, we believe the department could do more to engage community members in the STARS process. We make recommendations to this effect below.

#### Partnering with higher education

NDE has made several alliances with higher education in Nebraska, including teacher education programs, a statewide P-16 Initiative, and research projects.

1) *Teacher education programs.* At present, NDE is teaming with higher education to develop two groundbreaking programs. The first is University of Nebraska at Lincoln’s Assessment Cohort Program, an 18-hour graduate specialization in assessment literacy, which was recently recognized with a national award from the National Council on Measurement in Education. The inaugural cohort of 24 students, having taken a six-credit course in “Making Sense of Assessment,” as well as a practicum, is currently completing the last phase of its program with a course called “Analyzing and Reporting Data.” To our knowledge, this is the first graduate specialization of its kind in the nation.

These same teachers may become the first recipients of a proposed full-fledged endorsement. At present, the endorsement is in the planning stages, but the long-term goal is to create an active partnership among the graduate-degree-granting teacher education programs in the state and NDE to create a program in which teachers are fully endorsed as assessment specialists. Again, to our knowledge, this program would be unique in the United States.

Finally, Rick Stiggins has done considerable work with teacher educators in our state. Indeed, he has instigated a statewide discussion among teacher educators about what teachers should know, believe, and be able to do vis-à-vis

assessment. This discussion should prove useful as the state continues to move toward an assessment endorsement.

- 2) *Nebraska P-16 Initiative*. Like other P-16 initiatives across the country, Nebraska's program aims to create a seamless educational experience for the state's students from pre-kindergarten through college. P-16 is an articulation project in which educators, administrators, and other stakeholders collaborate to create a cross-institutional and cross-grade educational vision. The Mathematics team presented their vision of seamless math education at a statewide P-16 conference in December 2001. Its articulation document may be found on the web at <http://p-16nebraska.uneb.edu>. At present, the Language Arts/English Task Force is undertaking its articulation work. The P-16 Initiative is significant in that it brings together NDE, public schools, and higher education representatives from both education *and* the disciplines. It is part of a national movement that seems to be gaining momentum as more and more states are moving to a "systems approach" to education. Although Nebraska's P-16 Initiative is still very much under development and has not yet taken on a distinctive cast, it is a potentially rich site for partnership with higher education.
- 3) *Research*. Nebraska's institutions of higher education boast high-quality educational research, and NDE has wisely taken advantage of this expertise. For example, it has contracted with the Buros Institute, a well-respected testing and measurement organization, for technical assistance. James Impara, Barbara Plake, and Chad Buckendahl of the Buros Institute are all first-rate researchers, and have lent credibility to the technical integrity of Nebraska's approach. They are co-architects of the Nebraska plan, and have provided excellent, professional training for the review of District Assessment Portfolios. NDE has also contracted with UNL's Teachers College Institute to conduct various studies (see <http://tc.unl.edu/tci>), including, of course, this one, which also includes the partnership of UNL's College of Arts and Sciences.

NDE's partnerships with higher education in Nebraska are a critical component of their effective leadership because they afford relevant teacher training, shared responsibility for educational vision, and research expertise. At the same time, we believe these partnerships could be strengthened, as we suggest below.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations for State Leadership**

On the whole, we agree with Grand Island Superintendent Steve Joel's assessment: "Because of the commissioner's leadership and continued contributions of Nebraska's educators, the future for the state's children is bright" ("State's School"). Nebraska is receiving committed and responsible leadership from its department of education. Joel is also right to couple state leadership with "continued contributions of Nebraska educators" because the leadership approach taken by NDE seeks to balance state guidance with local expertise and decision-making. And as we have seen in other sections of this study, teachers and local administrators are, on the whole, responding. Our first recommendation, then, is to

- 1) *Continue present leadership emphases: vision-building, involving local educators and administrators, investing in professional development, educating all stakeholders, and partnering with higher education.* We find no evidence in our study that the state's leadership approach or strategies are in need of major changes. On the contrary, even most participants who oppose STARS on philosophical grounds respect the leadership demonstrated by the Commissioner and his staff throughout this process. Moreover – at the risk of being redundant – we would remind the department that participants in this study, in general, do *not* want radical change; rather, they almost desperately want “the rules of the game” to remain the same.

At the same time, we believe that the state could improve its leadership in some areas.

- 2) *Integrate local expertise and successes into ongoing professional development efforts.* Rick Stiggins regularly strikes themes relevant to Nebraska's approach, including balancing assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning; the need for clear, learning-focused district leadership; attention to different kinds of assessment methods, information, and users; keeping the focus on student learning, involvement, and motivation; standards of assessment quality; learning teams; creating a supportive policy environment. At the same time, Stiggins has not significantly integrated the work that Nebraska educators have already done into his presentations and workshops. His excellent insights on assessment must somehow be coupled with local expertise. In our view, NDE should endeavor to make success stories visible throughout the state, perhaps as part of workshops and trainings such as those provided by Stiggins. It might also enlist Nebraska teachers and local administrators to take active roles in those trainings and workshops, so that they can teach each other and create an ever-expanding community of inquiry and expertise.
- 3) *Involve more community members, and perhaps especially parents, in STARS.* Participants in other sections of this study reported that dealing with the public's misconceptions about assessment and reporting is a serious challenge. Moreover, we have seen in this chapter that one of the primary aims of STARS is to promote “community conversations.” It would seem wise, then, for NDE to model this principle in their own work, educating and involving community members in the work of school improvement. Including local board members at the Policy Forums is a start, but we believe NDE can do more to inform and engage community members. It would be simple enough, for instance, to add community members – parents, local small business owners, and so on – to advisory and planning groups. The NDE website could also have an interactive page designed especially for parents or non-educators. Finally, NDE could sponsor community forums – perhaps in concert with ESUs or even Rick Stiggins – to launch and maintain the kind of rich dialogue that the Commissioner rightly suggests is the cornerstone of democracy. Local control means local responsibility, and local responsibility must be widely shared beyond school walls.

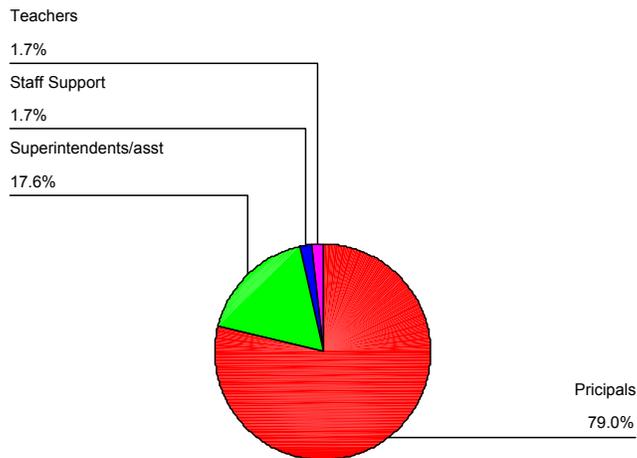
- 4) *Enhance involvement in teacher education.* The proposed assessment endorsement would go a long way in preparing teachers for the professional expertise required by STARS. On the other hand, an endorsement may not be enough; assessment literacy will need to be a significant feature of *all* teacher education programs, beginning with preservice. We advise working with teacher education faculty, as well as those in the disciplines who teach preservice teachers, to ensure that assessment literacy is not simply another specialization, but is also part of the general education of teachers. When teachers come into the profession with the idea that assessment is within their domain, and when they are armed with knowledge about assessment, they are in a good position to handle the responsibilities STARS places on them. Conversely, if teachers enter the profession – as they traditionally have – with the notion that assessment is someone else’s business, or without a sophisticated understanding of the purposes and functions of assessment, then the state will need to continue investing the bulk of its efforts and resources in the difficult work of *re*-training. We would predict that over the long haul, this would spell disaster for STARS.

## Local Leadership for School Improvement

### *Research Design*

We sent 282 surveys to superintendents, principals, and assessment contacts in 3 districts within each ESU in the state (excepting ESU 18, which includes only Lincoln Public Schools, which was included in the survey, and ESU 19, which includes only Omaha Public Schools, which declined to be included in this study). The districts within each ESU were chosen to represent a range of school sizes, and were randomly selected within each school size category. One hundred and nineteen (119) surveys were returned, for a return rate of 42%. The most likely explanation for this low return rate may be the length of the survey, which ran six pages. It may also be the case that many principals – the largest category of non-respondents – do not feel sufficiently informed about *district* leadership for school improvement to answer a survey on that topic. (Indeed, a number of principals who did respond indicated on the survey that they felt unqualified to answer some of the questions.) Of those returning surveys, 94 were principals; 21 were superintendents or assistant/associate superintendents; 2 were staff support personnel (curriculum specialist, counselor, etc.); and 2 were teachers. Figure 1 represents the percentages in each category.

**Figure 1. The Respondents**



Respondents had an average of 25.5 years of educational experience. All of them had post-baccalaureate degrees: 21 doctorates; 69 Masters; and 29 specialist degrees. They represented 17 Nebraska counties across the state, and worked in a range of school sizes. Of those reporting school size, the numbers break down like this:

Fewer than 500 students	21 (22%)
501-1,000 students	22 (23%)
1,001-5,000 students	29 (30%)
More than 5,000 students	25 (26%)

(As elsewhere in this report, percentages are rounded to the nearest full percent, and may not always equal 100.)

The survey focuses on district leadership for school improvement (see Appendix C). The questions, a mix of response scales and open-ended questions, revolved around four larger questions, which we have used to organize this section:

- ◆ ***Who are the leaders of district school improvement, and who assists them?***
- ◆ What skills are necessary for effective district leadership?
- ◆ What is the status of the district's school improvement plan?
- ◆ What challenges do local leaders of school improvement face?

Survey results were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), and descriptive statistics were run by the Nebraska Evaluation and Research (NEAR) Center. Results, including narrative comments, were analyzed by Gallagher, with the assistance of secondary researchers.

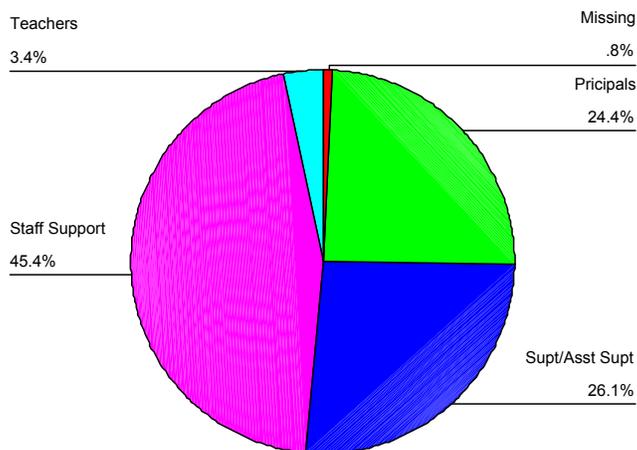
*Findings*

**Who are the leaders of district school improvement, and who assists them?**

- Staff support specialists, principals, and superintendents are the leaders of school improvement in most districts.
- Teachers and ESUs provide essential assistance to leaders.
- The majority of leaders have had formal education, NDE trainings and workshops, and “other” professional trainings and workshops related to school improvement.
- Districts are at least somewhat satisfied with NDE’s assistance on school improvement.
- STARS has improved leadership in most districts.

When asked to identify the “primary leader” of school improvement in their district (Q1), almost half the respondents (46%) named a staff support specialist – an assessment/standards/school improvement coordinator, curriculum director, director of staff development, and so on. About one-quarter each named a principal (25%) or a superintendent or assistant or associate superintendent (26%). Finally, a few respondents (3%) named a teacher as the district leader of school improvement. (See Figure 2.)

**Figure 2. Leaders of District School Improvement**



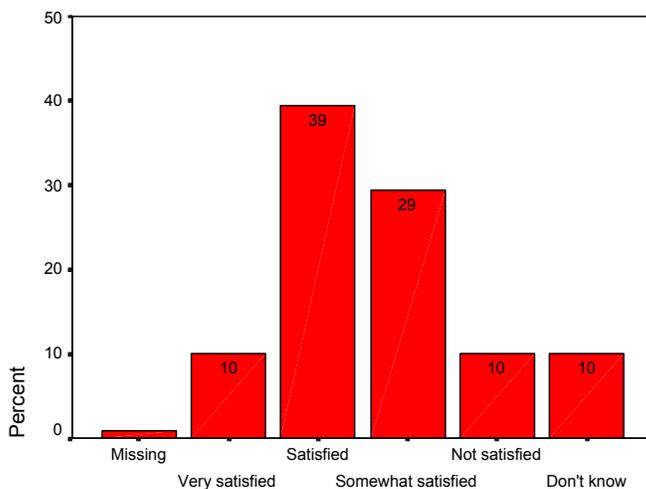
We also asked respondents to identify those who provided “essential assistance” to the leader (Q3). Those most frequently mentioned were

- ◆ principals (mentioned 42 times)
- ◆ superintendents (including assistant or associate) (34)
- ◆ staff support (27)
- ◆ school improvement team/assessment committee/executive committee (25)
- ◆ teachers (including department heads) (23)
- ◆ Educational Service Units (20)

Also receiving more than one mention were clerical staff (7), NDE (5), parents and community members (4), students (3), and local school boards (3).

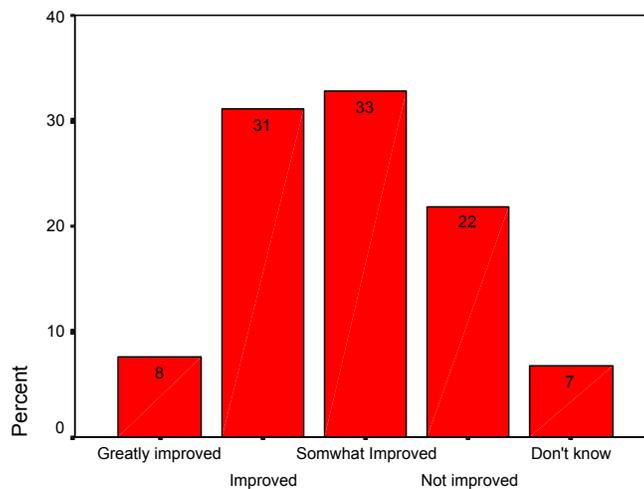
It is clear, then, that the primary engines of school improvement in most districts are staff support personnel, principals, and superintendents. When we consider that teachers often comprise the bulk of the advisory committees, it is clear that they, too, play an important role in leadership for school improvement. Many ESUs are players as well. Of course, NDE is also providing assistance. Half of the respondents reported that their district leadership is either “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with NDE’s guidance and support regarding school improvement, while 30% reported that theirs is “somewhat satisfied,” and only 10% reported that theirs are “not satisfied” (10% reported that they “don’t know”; Q8; see Figure 3). Narrative comments on this question were decidedly mixed. Some respondents complained that NDE has been late in advising districts of their expectations, especially details regarding the six Quality Criteria (see Chapter 2). Others praised NDE’s responsiveness, claiming that Christensen and his staff have been “helpful and encouraging at every opportunity.” On the whole, though, local leaders are generally at least somewhat satisfied with leadership provided by NDE for school improvement.

**Figure 3. How satisfied is district leadership with guidance and support from NDE?**



Similarly, the vast majority of respondents (72%) report that STARS has at least “somewhat improved” leadership in their district, with only 22% reporting no improvement in leadership as a result of STARS (Q9; Figure 4). Six (6) respondents claimed that STARS “empowers” teachers. Eleven (11) respondents indicated that STARS has increased focus on quality, accountability, and achievement in their districts. Again, we see general, if tentative, support for STARS, even amid serious concerns and challenges.

**Figure 4. Has the state’s standards and assessment process improved leadership in this district?**



Q9

Most districts are also receiving significant assistance from their ESU. Thirty-one percent (31%) of respondents reported that their ESU has been “very influential” in their school improvement process (Q10). Twenty-five percent (25%) reported that their ESU was “influential,” 27% “somewhat influential,” and only 14% “not influential” (3% answered “don’t know”). In narrative comments, several respondents (7) noted that their ESU is particularly helpful with information management and analysis, and 16 mentioned that the ESU ran workshops and other staff development activities. These results are consistent with our findings in the District Assessment Portfolio section of this study, in which 72% of respondents reported receiving “helpful assistance” from their ESUs.

Finally, respondents reported that their leaders have received a great deal of assistance by way of school improvement education, trainings, and workshops (Q4). Fifty-seven percent (57%) of respondents reported that their leader had formal education in school improvement; 51% had attended NDE trainings; 60% had attended NDE workshops; and 65% had attended “other professional trainings and workshops.” (Under this last category, 18 respondents wrote “ESU,” and a similar number named a national organization such as NCE or ACSD. Several also cited district workshops or trainings.)

**What skills are necessary for effective leadership?**

- *Communicating with staff/faculty, organization, developing a district vision, and team-building* are perceived to be the most important leadership skills for local school improvement leaders.
- Skills that relate to working with personnel are deemed most important, while others – such as paperwork, dealing with the state, or communicating with other districts – are rated less important.

We asked participants to rate the following leadership skills as “very important,” “important,” “somewhat important,” or “not important” in the school improvement process (Q5):

- ◆ organization
- ◆ communication with staff/faculty
- ◆ developing a district vision
- ◆ managing paperwork
- ◆ delegating authority
- ◆ managing people
- ◆ providing instructional support
- ◆ team-building
- ◆ communicating with the public

As Figure 5 demonstrates, *communication with staff/faculty* was considered the most important, followed closely by *organization*. *Developing a district vision* and *team-building* also received high ratings.

***Figure 5. Four most important leadership skills.***

	VI	I	SI	NI	DK
1. Communication with staff/ faculty	90%	10%	0%	0%	0%
2. Organization	81%	19%	0%	0%	0%
3. Developing district vision	73%	25%	2%	0%	0%
4. Team-building	67%	30%	3%	0%	0%

Following these, as we see in Figure 6, are *managing people, providing instructional support, delegating authority, communicating with the public, and managing paperwork*. We should note, however, that none of the skills received more than a single rating of *not important*. So while we have listed the skills in terms of highest to lowest rating of importance, it is important to recognize that respondents view *all* of these skills as important.

**Figure 6. Other leadership skills.**

	VI	I	SI	NI	DK
5. Managing people	61%	31%	9%	0%	0%
6. Providing instructional support	59%	34%	6%	1%	1%
7. Delegating authority	49%	45%	5%	1%	0%
8. Communication with public	48%	41%	12%	0%	0%
9. Managing Paperwork	43%	48%	9%	1%	0%

That said, it is clear that respondents rated as *most* important those skills that involve working effectively with staff, rather than, for instance, managing paperwork or dealing with the public. Narrative responses to several of the items (*communicating with staff/faculty, developing a district vision, delegating authority, managing people, and team-building*) suggest that creating teacher “buy-in” or “ownership” is crucial to effective district leadership. In fact, several respondents took issue with the term “managing people,” suggesting that they work *with* the staff, who are integral to school improvement. This same idea is supported by the suggestions we received for “other skills instrumental to effective leadership for school improvement” (Q6). While some respondents added skills such as “work ethic” or drive (5 comments), resource management (5), and time management (4), by far the largest category of response involved some variation of “people skills” (patience, sense of humor, collaborative skills, etc.) (32).

Of course, we should also note the high rating of *organization*. Here the narrative comments make it clear that organization is really a time management issue:

- ◆ “must stay on a timeline”
- ◆ “must be organized in this frenzied world”
- ◆ “many tasks and little time”
- ◆ “there is no time for unorganized meetings”

This concern about time is reinforced by our findings regarding “challenges” for leadership below, and in other sections of this study.

### **What is the status of the district’s school improvement plan?**

- Respondents report favorably on their districts’ school improvement plan (SIP):

On the whole, respondents painted a positive portrait of their districts’ school improvement plan (SIP):

- ◆ 97% reported that their SIP is appropriate to their district;
- ◆ 96% reported that their SIP is consistent with Nebraska State Standards;

- ◆ 88% reported that their SIP is “clear”;
- ◆ 86% reported that their SIP is supported by teachers in their district;
- ◆ 80% reported that their SIP is understood by teachers in their district;
- ◆ 84% reported that their SIP is supported by the community in the district; and
- ◆ 56% reported that their SIP is understood by the community in the district.

Most of these numbers, to be sure, are reassuring: they suggest that districts are “on track” with their SIPs. On the other hand, if support indeed outstrips understanding for both teachers and, to a much greater extent, community members, and if in fact only 56% of the latter understand the district SIP, we might also see some cause for concern here. We might wonder, for instance, how long communities will continue to support districts’ school improvement plans without understanding them. While a few (3) respondents wrote that their communities display a “lack of interest,” many more (12) note that information is not being communicated clearly (or at all) by the district. We might also find reason to be concerned when we consider that in 20% of the reporting districts, teachers do not understand their district’s SIP. Among those who answered “no” to this question, 4 cited “communication problems” as a cause; 3 cited “lack of teacher motivation”; and 2 cited “time.” Whatever the cause, though, a “teacher-led” school improvement system requires that all students understand, and indeed participate, in their districts’ school improvement process.

#### **What challenges do local leaders of school improvement face?**

- *Time, ensuring professional development for teachers, data management, and resources* are rated as the most severe challenges faced by districts in the school improvement process.
- Of these, *time* is by far considered the most severe challenge.
- *Meeting state requirements* and *communicating with the state* are serious concerns, but are not rated among the most severe challenges.
- Like the most important skills, the most severe challenges are “in-house” concerns, and have mainly to do with working with personnel.

We asked respondents to rate the following items as “extremely challenging,” “challenging,” “somewhat challenging,” or “not challenging” for school improvement leaders in Nebraska (Q11):

- ◆ communication between districts
- ◆ communication with state
- ◆ communication within districts
- ◆ communication with ESU
- ◆ data interpretation
- ◆ data management
- ◆ dealing with the public
- ◆ developing a district vision for school improvement

- ◆ ensuring adequate professional development for teachers
- ◆ meeting state requirements
- ◆ quality of administrative staff
- ◆ resources
- ◆ shifts in students/community demographics
- ◆ time

Figure 7 includes the four challenges that were rated most severe by our respondents. Perhaps not surprisingly, *time* was rated as most challenging. Narrative comments on this item often mention demands on teachers’ time in particular, and a few note that smaller districts are especially pressed for time, but the overall trend of all the narrative comments is discernable in these examples:

- ◆ “[we are] asked to do more with less time”
- ◆ “[we have] more and more to do – same amount of time”
- ◆ “we are asked to do more and more but aren’t given any time to do it.”

**Figure 7. Four most severe challenges**

	EC	C	SC	NC	DK
1. Time	80%	19%	2%	0%	0%
2. Professional development	43%	40%	16%	2%	0%
3. Data management	41%	40%	13%	5%	2%
4. Resources	40%	40%	19%	2%	0%

The challenge receiving the second-highest rating was *ensuring adequate professional development for teachers*. Narrative comments suggest that for many districts, this is a financial issue: 17 respondents note that money is limited for professional development in their districts. Others indicate that it is a *time* issue: the same number – 17 – specifically mention time constraints as an impediment to ensuring adequate professional development.

The challenge receiving the third-highest rating was *data management*. In narrative comments, 10 respondents suggested that the sheer amount of data relating to school improvement is onerous. Four (4) added that they lack software that would make this challenge more manageable.

Like a lack of funding for professional development, this software concern may be construed as a resource issue. When asked to consider *resources* as a separate category, 40% of respondents rated it very challenging, another 40% as challenging, 19% as somewhat challenging, and 2% as not challenging. Sixteen (16) respondents specifically noted in narrative comments that finances are limited in their districts at present.

These four factors – *time*, *ensuring adequate professional development*, *data management*, and *resources* – were deemed by respondents to be the most challenging for district leadership. These ongoing challenges are also, as we saw above, emphases of NDE in its work with districts. This suggests that NDE has accurately gauged the needs

of districts in the school improvement process. It also suggests that more work needs to be done; districts continue to feel the pinch in these areas.

On the other hand, as we see in Figure 8, *meeting state requirements* and *communication with the state* come near the middle of our list of factors in terms of severity (6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, respectively, of 14). While this indicates a serious level of concern among respondents, it is important to note that respondents do not experience their work with the state as among their most severe challenges.

**Figure 8. Other Challenges**

	EC	C	SC	NC	DK
5. Data interpretation	35%	37%	17%	9%	2%
6. Meeting state requirements	21%	37%	36%	5%	0%
7. Communication with state	18%	36%	35%	13%	9%
8. Developing district vision	14%	33%	31%	21%	1%
9. Communication within district	16%	32%	36%	16%	0%
10. Quality of administrative staff	11%	42%	25%	19%	3%
11. Dealing with public	11%	31%	41%	14%	3%
12. Shifts in demographics	20%	25%	32%	19%	4%
13. Communication with ESU	9%	17%	33%	38%	3%
14. Communication between districts	11%	25%	35%	14%	14%

When asked to identify the top three challenges (Q12), respondents reinforced these findings. We did not explicitly ask for a ranking of those three challenges, though we suspect that many respondents placed their top ranking in the first category. In any event, the top four factors – *time*, *ensuring adequate professional development*, *data management*, and *resources* – top the list again here. In the first category, *time* received over three times more citations than any other item. It was also named 87 times across the three categories – by far the most of any item. *Resources* received the second-most mentions, both in the first category and across the three categories (50). *Ensuring adequate professional development* was third in the first category, and received the fourth-most mentions across categories (37). And *data management* was fourth in the first category, and received the third-most mentions across categories (43).

From these four challenges, we find a precipitous drop-off to the fifth most-mentioned item: *data interpretation* (15). Following that are *shifts in student/ community demographics* (12), *meeting state requirements* (10), *communication with the state* (6), *dealing with the public* (4), *quality of administrative staff* (3), and *communication within district* (1). *Communication between districts* and *communication with ESUs* received no mentions across all three categories.

We note, again, that the most severe challenges districts face are specific to their work with their staff. Dealing with the state, with the public, with ESUs, and with other districts are all less of a challenge than handling in-house personnel concerns such as time, resources, professional development, and data management and interpretation.

### **Findings by position, district size, and region**

We found no relationships when we broke results down by respondents' position, by district size, or by region. In other words, it does not appear that these three variables affect how respondents answered any of the questions on our survey.

### *Conclusions and Recommendations Regarding Local Leadership*

Results of this section of the study indicate that school improvement in Nebraska is a continuous, holistic, local responsibility heavily shaped by available resources (time and money chief among them) but driven, finally, by the teachers who are at its center. The skills identified by respondents as most important to leadership for school improvement – namely, *communication with staff/faculty, organization, developing a district vision, and team-building* – revolve around working effectively with educators. Similarly, the challenges respondents identified as most severe – *time, adequate professional development, data management, and resources* – are all in-house concerns.

By our respondents' accounts, school improvement is healthy in most districts; school improvement plans are generally appropriate to their districts, consistent with state standards, clear, and supported by educators and non-educators alike. On the other hand, it appears that there is some work to do before the SIP is understood by all teachers and community members – a prerequisite, it would seem, for the kind of “community conversations” NDE hopes to sponsor through STARS. This points to our first recommendation for NDE:

- 1) *Help districts engage their local publics.* It is interesting to note that our respondents did not rate “communicating with public” among the top skills or “dealing with the public” among the top challenges for district leadership. This may seem reasonable when communities are supportive in 84% of districts. However, if it is also true, as respondents reported, that only 56% of districts have communities that *understand* their SIP, then STARS simply cannot fulfill its mission of generating meaningful community dialogue. We believe NDE needs to do more to foster and model the kinds of conversations it hopes to promote. In the first half of this chapter, we detailed a couple ways in which NDE is attempting to do so, but we also offered recommendations for modeling community engagement in its own work. In addition, it could sponsor, and its representatives could appear at, community forums centered on the Commissioner's powerful idea that engaged discussion is the cornerstone of democracy. These forums would be aimed at both informing and engaging the community in the crafting of districts' ongoing school improvement process. Some districts are already doing this work; our suggestion here is for NDE to recognize, publicize, and promote such forums.
- 2) *Help districts get ALL teachers on board.* If 56% is an unacceptably low number to indicate community understanding, 80% is an unacceptably low number to indicate

teacher understanding. Districts must do a better job of enlisting all educators in the work of school improvement. As we have suggested, STARS hinges on the active participation of those at the center of the enterprise: teachers. The corollary mantra for any school improvement system that seeks to “leave no child behind” should be “leave no teacher behind.” Again, NDE can promote this idea by sponsoring cross-curricular and cross-grade approaches to standards, assessment, and accountability. STARS cannot continue to remain the purview of fourth-, eighth-, and eleventh-grade teachers; it must be the shared responsibility of all teachers. Specifically, NDE might develop trainings on bundling standards, developing reportable assessments in adjacent grades, and Six Trait writing for content area teachers.

- 3) *Help districts use STARS as a vehicle for school improvement.* One respondent wrote the following on a survey: “[Y]our survey seems to imply that standards/ assessment issues are the same as school improvement. Is this a new direction?” If we understand NDE’s approach, the answer to this question is “yes.” In Nebraska’s unique approach, school improvement and accountability, like teaching and assessment, should not be viewed as two separate processes. Rather, school improvement should be the result of accountability. We saw in Chapter 2 that some, but certainly not all, districts have made this mindset shift. It is crucial that districts couple these processes not only for philosophical reasons, but also because districts simply do not have the time or the resources to treat school improvement as separate from STARS. NDE should take every opportunity to articulate this relationship, and to formalize it – perhaps by combining reporting procedures (the reporting of school improvement plans and assessment plans, for instance).
- 4) *Continue to invest in local educators.* It is clear from this survey that money and expertise remain ongoing challenges for those involved in school improvement. NDE must continue its high level of investment. We also note again that we continue to hear from small schools that they are not receiving adequate financial support for school improvement because funding formulae for STAR grants are tied to school populations, rather than need.
- 5) *Continue to demonstrate awareness of time constraints.* The message that comes through most clearly in this survey is that time is *the* major challenge for all districts. When the state shifted the reporting schedule, it recognized the demands that STARS is placing on educators’ and administrators’ time. NDE should continue to help districts deal with overwhelming time constraints. It should consider ways to streamline the reporting process, for instance, as respondents in Chapter 2 suggested. This will likely entail making more effective use of emerging electronic technologies to simplify reporting procedures. NDE might also sponsor leadership trainings or workshops specifically designed to help leaders with time management. These could be led by district leaders who have successfully negotiated time constraints through, for instance, organizational strategies, teamwork, innovations in data management, and so on.

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## *Chapter 6*

### *Conclusion: Summary Recommendations and Research Plan*

Overall, this study finds the state of assessment in the state of Nebraska to be healthy but somewhat tenuous. First of all, STARS enjoys a fair level of support from its major stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, the media, the legislature, and community members. This is especially true for the Statewide Writing Assessment (SWA), where we find warm support for Six Trait writing, the instructional program that forms the backbone of the SWA. (The writing examination itself finds less support.)

The study also shows a high level of professional development among both teachers and administrators – another sign of a healthy standards, assessment, and accountability system. Though high-quality professional development remains an ongoing need, teachers and administrators have made important gains in “assessment literacy” as a result of the capacity-building efforts of NDE, Educational Service Units, and districts.

Most significantly, our research reveals that STARS is having positive impact on curriculum and classroom instruction. Teachers report improved communication and collaboration on curriculum design, and more focus on key curricular areas, such as writing. They also report using assessment to identify and address students’ strengths and weaknesses as learners. (Systematic or programmatic approaches to targeted instruction, however, are lacking in many districts.)

At the same time, STARS faces several major challenges. The support we have detected for the system, first of all, is tenuous. Many stakeholders are taking a “wait and see” attitude, and look upon this unique system with considerable skepticism. This is especially so among teachers and administrators for whom assessment and reporting, at the state level, is a new experience. As is true in states across the country, teachers are also understandably fearful that they are being “deprofessionalized,” as their workload intensifies and the screws of accountability are tightened. In light of these concerns, teachers are responding exceptionally positively to the new demands placed on them, mainly because they are committed to teaching and learning and hopeful that STARS will help them improve as educators.

Still, too many teachers seem to be “opting out” of STARS because they do not teach at the reporting levels (4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup>). At present, far too much responsibility for assessment and reporting is falling on the shoulders of these reporting-grade teachers. Teachers also are not as actively involved throughout different phases of STARS as they should be in a “teacher-led” system. Specifically, they do not typically play a major role in the development and assembly of District Assessment Portfolios.

STARS would also benefit from the richer engagement of community members and higher education. Several sections of this report point to a need for enhanced partnerships with these important stakeholders.

Perhaps most importantly, many districts have not integrated their work on STARS with their work on school improvement. The mindset shift that places standards, assessment, and accountability at the center of the school improvement effort is crucial to the success of STARS, and it is yet to happen in many places around the state.

In the final analysis, we believe Nebraska stands a good chance of becoming a national leader in assessment and school renewal generally; indeed, as we saw in Chapter 1, STARS is receiving significant national attention. It is also receiving strong leadership

at both the state and local levels. In order for this unique system to work, however, it will need to promote significant growth in both commitment and capacity, especially among teachers, the putative leaders of the system. STARS will also need the support and involvement of other partners, including community members and higher education, in order to fulfill its aims. We believe the results of this study show that progress has already been achieved in all of these areas, but further research will be necessary to track continued growth.

#### Summary Recommendations

Our summary recommendations echo and extend those generated by the three Policy Partner Forums held in early 2002 (and discussed briefly in Chapter 5). In response to the question, “What do we need to engage all of the stakeholders in the school improvement process,” forum participants – a mix of teachers, district and ESU staff developers, local administrators, local board members and community members, state board members, and legislators (or their representatives) – indicated the following as “needs”:

- ◆ *Consistency.* NDE was advised to “stay the course,” or – to use a different metaphor – not to “keep moving the target.”
- ◆ *Teacher Involvement.* NDE was advised to keep teachers involved in school improvement by creating “buy-in.”
- ◆ *Professional Development.* NDE was advised to help teachers become engaged by communicating clearly and supporting their ongoing professional growth.
- ◆ *Clear communication with all stakeholders.* NDE was advised to keep students, teachers, parents, the media, local boards, and community members informed.
- ◆ *Resources: time and money.* NDE was advised that their ambitious approach requires significant investment of time and money.
- ◆ *Leadership.* NDE was advised that strong leadership at the state and local levels is “the key” to successful school improvement.

*--Adapted from notes generously provided by John Clark  
of NDE*

Interviewees and survey respondents in our study clearly agree that these are significant needs as the state moves forward with STARS. Indeed, as we look across the sections of our study in order to formulate summary recommendations, we find both reinforcement and enhancement of these themes.

- 1) *Stay the Course.* Perhaps the loudest and clearest message we heard from those “in the field” was a call for consistency and stability. As we have seen, there is a widespread perception that NDE, the state board, and sometimes ESUs keep changing “the rules of the game.” There is also a growing fear that new federal mandates will render hard-won local work moot. None of this is to suggest that teachers and administrators want STARS to remain exactly as it is; on the contrary, they offer many suggestions for improving the system, as we have seen. What it *does* mean is that there is a widespread – and in our view quite understandable – desire for overall clarity and consistency. Particularly damaging, in our view, would be the implementation of additional testing and reporting requirements.
- 2) *Carefully monitor pressure.* NDE is on the horns of a classic leadership dilemma: as it strives for stability and consistency, it must also be responsive to the dynamics of an evolving system and evolving stakeholders. There is no question that STARS must continue to develop; a completely static system in our ever-changing culture would not stand a chance. There is also no question that this state of affairs will cause friction. In our view, the key is not to ignore or “manage” that friction, but rather to make it *generative*. As we have suggested elsewhere, this system can work only if it is negotiated, through dialogue and the sharing of visions, among its major players, including teachers and local administrators. This means that the players must change and learn, but it also means that the system itself must change and “learn.” In the end, NDE must continue to balance stability and consistency with incremental, carefully paced change. This study can help the state continue to gauge teachers’ and administrators’ receptivity to change and level of commitment to the system.
- 3) *Recognize, celebrate, and **reward** teachers’ professionalism.* Undoubtedly, teachers’ labor has intensified in recent years. In Nebraska, this is perhaps especially true, for the professional purview of a teacher has been radically expanded to include responsibility for assessment. It is no surprise, then, to find our participants working long, hard hours, devoting nights, weekends, and summers to their work. This labor must be recognized, rewarded, and celebrated. Of course, this might mean making gestures and even creating programs that draw positive attention to the largely invisible (if often romanticized) work that educators do. But we also need to face a hard economic fact: it will become increasingly difficult to attract and retain excellent teachers if the teaching profession continues to fall further and further behind the economic curve. As starting salaries in the professional fields of engineering, mathematics and statistics, and computer science hover around \$47,000 nationally (California Professional Development Task Force), Nebraska beginning teachers average \$24,356. The average Nebraska teacher makes \$34,258, compared to the national average of \$43,250. (“Nebraska Teacher”). Despite the present budget crisis, we believe it is necessary for all educational stakeholders to mount a concerted effort to protect and enhance school aid and to bring about significant increases in

teacher pay. Teachers in this state are comporting themselves as true professionals; they deserve professional recognition *and* professional pay.

- 4) *Focus on building teacher commitment.* Historians of education have demonstrated that the vast majority of school reforms have failed because they do not account for or engage the needs and interests of those who stand at the point of contact with students: teachers. (David Tyack, for instance, anticipates that “the most lasting and beneficial change will come when reformers regard teachers as major trustees of the common good and honor their best practices and most humane values as major resources in reforming the schools” [211]). Nebraska’s approach stands to break from this tradition – *if* it can enlist the active support of teachers. As we suggested in the previous chapter, NDE’s mantra, as it moves forward with STARS, might be, “Leave No Teacher Behind.” We believe that the other suggestions in this section and in previous chapters are avenues to building teacher commitment. But we should also remember that Nebraska teachers are extraordinarily committed to their students’ learning, and extraordinarily skilled as educators. Perhaps the best way to enlist teachers’ support of STARS is to convince them that it will help their students learn, and that their professional judgment will continue to be trusted even as technical assessment quality is ensured. We have already seen this happen with Six Trait writing; a similar development ought to be the goal of STARS in general.
- 5) *Focus on local values and local investment.* This is a corollary to #3: if local educators are to “buy in” to STARS, to have “ownership” in it (to invoke two metaphors that have repeatedly surfaced in our study), they must understand how it improves teaching and learning in their classrooms. Similarly, at the district level, successful leaders operate out of a primary commitment to what is right for their situation; compliance with state mandates is important, but secondary. NDE’s resources should continue to be targeted to providing locals with the necessary expertise, funding, and moral support they need to enact this “school-based, teacher-led” system from the inside out, as it were.
- 6) *Promote widely shared responsibility for STARS.* Again, local control should translate into local responsibility. And that local responsibility ideally will be widely shared. However, our research suggests that the onus of STARS is falling on the shoulders of teachers in the reporting grades (fourth, eighth, and eleventh). This must change, and NDE (in conjunction with ESUs) can help by showing districts – perhaps with the aid of successful models – how to spread assessments across grades; how to bundle standards for assessment and reporting purposes; how to develop whole-building learning team approaches; and how to involve content area teachers in Six Trait writing instruction. It can also send the message, at every opportunity, that STARS is the responsibility of *all* teachers.
- 7) *Help districts and schools integrate of STARS and school improvement.* More and more teachers and administrators are coming to see assessment as part of teaching and learning, rather than adjunct to them. STARS promotes a similar

mindset shift – or, rather, the same mindset shift writ large at the building and district level. That is, STARS is part of school improvement, rather than adjunct to it. This point is crucial philosophically: if teachers and local administrators separate these two processes, then standards, assessment, and accountability are merely compliance mandates, not engines of school improvement. But this is also important logistically: the integration of these two processes will save considerable time, effort, and money for districts that are currently either duplicating their efforts, or needlessly expending them in two different directions. This, too, can become a more prominent piece of NDE’s message. In addition, NDE can formalize this relationship by combining the requirements involving STARS and school improvement – the reporting of school improvement plans and assessment plans, for instance, might be integrated.

- 8) *Enhance community engagement efforts.* In Chapter 5, we make a number of specific recommendations involving both modeling and promoting community engagement in STARS. This is the area where NDE has perhaps done the least work already, but we believe it is an important area to emphasize if Commissioner Christensen is serious, as we believe he is, about promoting “community conversations” about education across this state.
  
- 9) *Enhance alliances with higher education beyond teacher education.* In addition to stepping up its involvement in teacher education, NDE could expand this partnership vision to include the whole higher educational system in the state. We believe that Nebraska’s P-16 Initiative offers a significant opportunity to create three-way partnerships among p-12 education, teacher educators, and the postsecondary disciplines. The Commissioner is fond of suggesting that NDE is committed to creating “a teaching culture, not a testing culture.” In our view, a vital teaching culture in this state will involve educators all along the educational spectrum. The P-16 Initiative, as currently conceived, is a good start toward initiating cross-institutional dialogue, but it has not yet developed a coherent and concrete mission or plan that emerges from the specific needs and strengths of Nebraska’s distinctive educational situation. We would advise the formation of a planning group – perhaps composed of the co-chairs of the Mathematics and Language Arts task forces as well as members of the steering committee and other leaders from NDE, the schools, and higher education – to create a concrete blueprint and action plan for a uniquely Nebraskan P-16 Initiative. A “systems approach” to educational renewal in this state would bring every level of education and every type of institution to the table as equals. Perhaps Nebraska is even ready for what John Goodlad calls a “center of pedagogy”: an organization that brings together public school representatives, teacher educators, and disciplinary faculty in higher education to forge a vision, conduct research, and design programs that promote collaborative, P-16 renewal and mutual, ongoing professional development. (See Patterson et al.) In any event, our recommendation is to push for more formalized coordination of institutional renewal across the sectors of education in our state.

## II. Toward a Three-Year Research Plan

This project was initially conceived as a three-year study (AY 2001-2 through AY 2003-4). The shift in the state's reporting process, however, has led us to modify this initial plan. We now believe that a *four*-year study, taking us through AY 2004-5, is in order. This shift is beneficial to our study because it allows us to return to our baseline data within these two disciplines – Language Arts and Mathematics – thus allowing us to work with two similar groups over time. We believe this longitudinal data is crucial to a comprehensive evaluation of STARS. Having longitudinal data in *two* disciplines would also allow us to track larger, statewide trends that are not discipline-specific.

IX. We are now prepared to identify research questions that will guide Year Two of this study. First of all, we will continue, in general, to focus on the same areas we determined for Year One:

- ◆ perceived benefits and challenges of STARS;
  - ◆ the state of “assessment literacy” among Nebraska teachers and administrators;
  - ◆ leadership requirements and demands posed by STARS;
  - ◆ effects of STARS on classroom practice;
  - ◆ effects of STARS on school climate; and
  - ◆ student inclusion issues.

More specifically, however, we can frame questions such as the following:

- ◆ Is assessment literacy growing among teachers and local administrators? Is assessment quality rising, and do teachers and administrators have increased knowledge in terms of collecting, managing, interpreting, and using data?
- ◆ Is the system becoming more manageable? Is the pressure being accurately gauged and usefully managed?

- ◆ What particular challenges do small schools face, and what can be done to help them address these challenges?
- ◆ Is commitment to the system, especially among teachers, growing? Do teachers and administrators perceive that the benefits of STARS outweigh the challenges and drawbacks, or vice versa?
- ◆ Are STARS and school improvement becoming more integrated?
- ◆ Do we see a growing commitment to shared responsibility? Are more teachers in more grade levels across the curriculum becoming actively involved in assessment and accountability?
- ◆ How does the Statewide Writing Assessment affect methods of writing instruction?
- ◆ Are teachers' roles vis-à-vis STARS changing? Are they truly becoming the leaders of STARS?
- ◆ What do local schools and districts need to maintain the momentum they have developed, or to gain momentum for school improvement?
- ◆ How will new federal mandates affect the ongoing development of STARS? How is the prospect of new federal requirements affecting teachers' and administrators' work?
- ◆ Are all stakeholders becoming more knowledgeable, more involved in, school improvement? Specifically, are community members and higher education becoming more engaged?
- ◆ Are the guidelines for accommodations for Special Education and English Language Learners becoming clearer to teachers and administrators? More generally, is the philosophy of including all students clear to teachers and administrators? And: *are* all students being included in STARS?
- ◆ What populations (of students, teachers, or communities), if any, are *not* being served by STARS? Does STARS "leave anyone behind"?
- ◆ Are students becoming more involved in (self-)assessment? Are students becoming more motivated learners as a result of "assessment *for* learning," not just "assessment *of* learning"? (These are major themes of Rick Stiggins' workshops on assessment.)
- ◆ What ongoing or new challenges do teachers and administrators face as they continue their work on STARS?

This list is neither exhaustive nor set in stone. Indeed, we will continue to use advisory groups to sharpen the conceptual frame for the project and to develop our research instruments. That said, we conclude this Year One report with a tentative sketch of a three-year plan for further research:

<b>Year Two (AY2002-3)</b>	<b>Year Three (AY2003-4)</b>	<b>Year Four (AY2004-5)</b>
Reconstitute research team	Reconstitute research team	Reconstitute research team
Expand and consolidate advisory groups into a single group composed of NDE representatives; teacher educators and disciplinary faculty from several higher education institutions; and teachers, staff support specialists, and administrators from several public schools	Reconstitute advisory group	Reconstitute advisory group
Sharpen conceptual framework and design new research instruments (surveys and interview questions) based on Year One Report and counsel of advisory group	Sharpen conceptual framework and design new research instruments (surveys and interview questions) based on Year Two Report and counsel of advisory group	Sharpen conceptual framework and design new research instruments (surveys and interview questions) based on Year Three Report and counsel of advisory group
Expand participant base for DAP beyond exemplary districts; expand research focus to include entire DAP process (not just assembly)	Continue to study DAP/leadership process in multiple districts	Continue to study DAP/leadership process in multiple districts
Incorporate leadership research into DAP research		
Generate baseline data for Mathematics teachers similar to that generated for Language Arts teachers in Year One	Create participant group similar to that of Year One (Language Arts teachers) and compare data	Create participant group similar to that of Year Two (Mathematics teachers) and compare data
Use similar research questions to interview eighth-grade writing teachers about the Statewide Writing Assessment in districts not yet tapped	Use similar research questions to interview eleventh-grade writing teachers about the Statewide Writing Assessment in districts not yet tapped	
Seek outside funding for continuation of project at least through Year Four		
Submit Year Two Report to Commissioner of Education (August 2003)	Submit Year Three Report to Commissioner of Education (August 2004)	Submit Year Four Report to Commissioner of Education (August 2005)

## Works Cited

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## RESEARCHERS

### **PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS:**

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**Dr. Deborah L. Bandalos**, Associate Professor and Program Director, UNL's Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Education Program. Bandalos has published widely in scholarly journals and collections in the area of educational measurement, and has conducted a variety of educational research projects in Nebraska and elsewhere. She also sits on editorial boards of many measurement and methods journals. She recently received a Teachers College Distinguished Teaching Award.

### **SECONDARY INVESTIGATORS:**

**Andrea Hicks, M.S.** With her degree in Survey Research and Methodology from UNL's Teachers College, Hicks is a research consultant for area corporations. She has also worked with the Gallup organization.

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