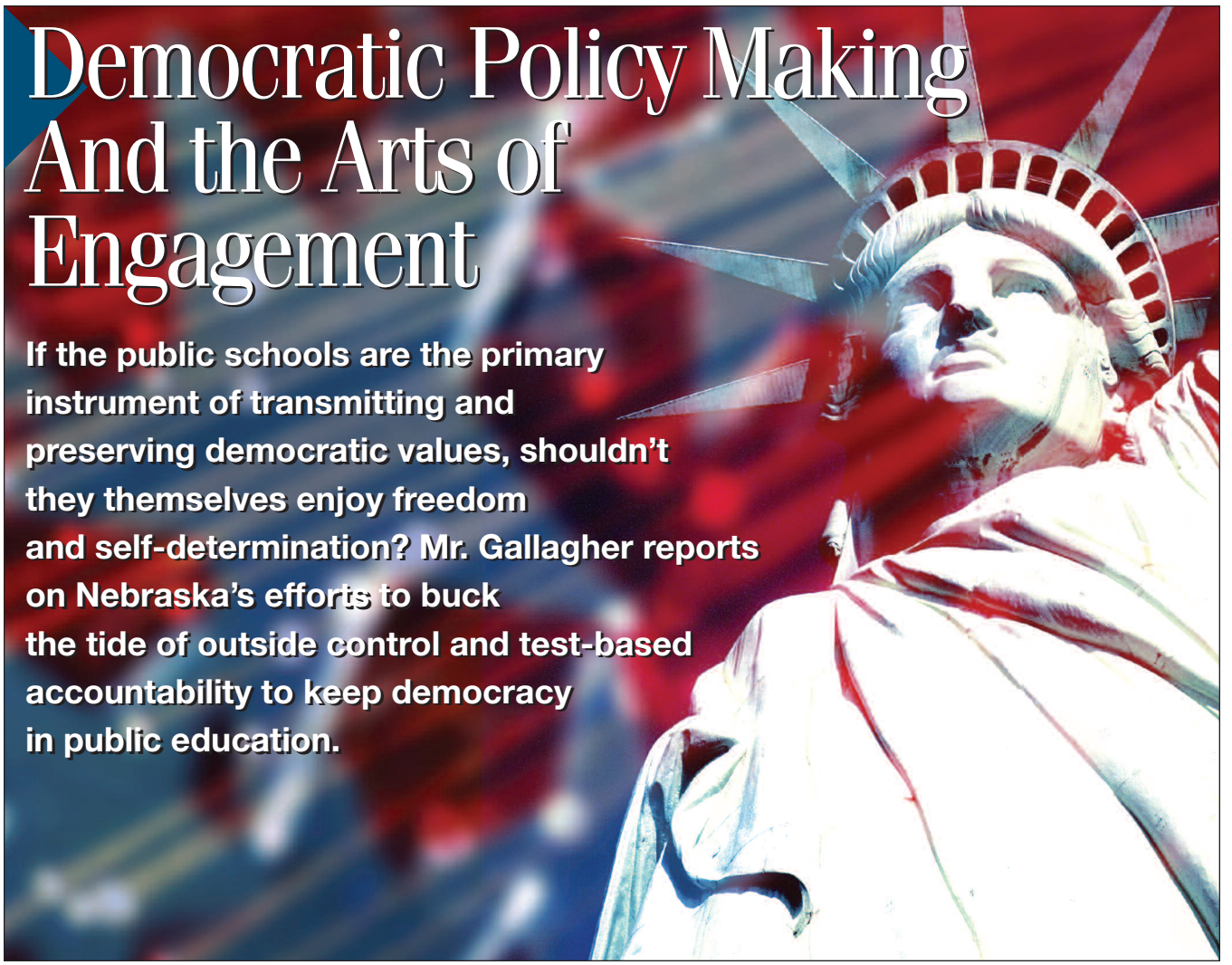
Democratic Policy Making And the Arts of Engagement



If the public schools are the primary instrument of transmitting and preserving democratic values, shouldn't they themselves enjoy freedom and self-determination? Mr. Gallagher reports on Nebraska's efforts to buck the tide of outside control and test-based accountability to keep democracy in public education.

By Chris W. Gallagher

> The [education] policy system must learn to be less arrogant and more bilateral so that its work is informed by the wisdom of good practice and its efforts do not override those of good schools.
>
> — *Linda Darling-Hammond*

LESS ARROGANT and more bilateral. Linda Darling-Hammond's advice brings to mind a familiar refrain offered by critics of the Bush Administration's foreign policy. These folks remind us that, if we want to see a world in which democracy is "on the march," then we will need to act more democratically in our dealings with other countries, particularly those in the Middle East. Because democracy offers the promise of human freedom and self-determination in the context of shared commitment to the public good, it demands that we strive to build rich and mutual relationships through dialogue and diplomacy, rather than issue stern-father edicts from on high. Likewise, we cannot expect schools to contribute to the functioning of our democracy if they are denied freedom and self-determination through remote control and bullying policy making.

The parallel is more than casual. If democracy in the world depends in large part on democracy at home, then democracy at home depends in large part on what we do in, for, and to our schools. At their best, public schools are, in Gerald Bracey's terms, "democracy's workshops."[1] They are the places where we work on and work out our most pressing social problems — where we learn,

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as Deborah Meier so aptly puts it, "the art of living together as citizens."[2] At their best, schools make democracy both the *means* of learning (i.e., what teachers and students do) and the *object* of learning (i.e., what teachers and students learn about). They honor the fundamental democratic principle that people ought to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

The *Kappan* regularly publishes excellent articles promoting democratic civic education. For instance, the January 2005 cover story was devoted to that topic. But we need to recognize as well that schools will not protect and promote democracy if they are not treated and run democratically. As John Dewey wrote nearly a century ago:

> Until the public school system is organized in such a way that every teacher has some regular and representative way in which he or she can register judgment upon matters of educational importance, with the assurance that this judgment will somehow affect the school system, the assertion that the present system is not, from an internal standpoint, democratic seems justified. Either we come here upon some fixed and inherent limitation upon the democratic principle, or else we find in this fact an obvious discrepancy between the conduct of the school and the conduct of social life — a discrepancy so great as to demand immediate and persistent effort at reform.[3]

His coy posturing aside, Dewey saw this discrepancy quite clearly. In his writing, he returned repeatedly to the theme of the disempowerment of teachers at the hands of outside forces — whether economic interests, a vaguely defined "public," or a meddlesome educational bureaucracy. Dewey believed this disempowerment to be a crime against democracy and a violation of teachers' humanity:

> The dictation, in theory at least, of the subject-matter to be taught, to the teacher who is to engage in the actual work of instruction, and frequently, under the name of close supervision, the attempt to determine the methods which are to be used in teaching, mean nothing more or less than the deliberate restriction of intelligence, the imprisoning of the spirit.[4]

But we never learned Dewey's lesson. In fact, public schools today are less in the direct control of those who spend their days in them, or those immediately affected by them, than ever before. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and state regimes of standardized testing have located decision-making authority not in classrooms but in state conference rooms and corporate boardrooms. By granting these external "experts" control over education, the test-based accountability agenda has denied professional status to teachers, depriving them of their human vocation. Far from building the kind of mutual, dialogic relationships on which democracy depends, this agenda has fostered distrust of teachers and schools, driving wedges between teachers and those who should be their partners: students, parents, and community members.[5]

I am not a policy or legal expert, and I will not presume to map out the responsibilities of federal, state, and local policy makers or to examine the constitutionality of specific policy mandates (though the recent report of the Office of the Inspector General on Reading First raises some serious questions in my layperson's mind about the legality of some of President Bush's education policies). Rather, I'm interested in exploring the *disposition* required of policy makers by a democratic republic. With NCLB's reauthorization evidently on hold for the moment and as evidence of the undemocratic consequences of high-stakes standardized testing continues to mount,[6] we need a new kind of policy making — and a new kind of policy maker. Those of us who care about public education in our democracy need to start talking about the *responsibilities* of policy makers instead of merely crossing our fingers and hoping for the best.

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For the past five years, my colleagues and I at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln have been conducting research in our state, where education policy is informed by a democratic vision and thus offers a glimpse, at least, of the kind of policy making democracy demands. The *Kappan* has published several articles on Nebraska's unique system of local assessment and reporting — the School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System or STARS — so I won't belabor its details here.[7] In any case, for my present purposes the details of the system are not what's important. What's central here is the fact that the state has entrusted teachers to design the assessments that measure student learning on standards because Nebraska policy makers believe schools belong to teachers, kids, parents, and communities. Indeed, democratic deliberation is at the center of

Nebraska Commissioner of Education Douglas Christensen's educational vision; he insists that education remain in the hands of local educators because "informed conversations, and informed decisions, are the heart and soul of democracy."[8]

The Nebraska story, which is detailed in my book *Reclaiming Assessment*, is a complicated tale; it is not an unalloyed success story. Nonetheless, Nebraska's historical experiment in empowering classroom teachers is well worth paying attention to, and the research my colleagues and I have done — which includes several rounds of interviews, surveys, and observations of educators and policy makers — provides an informal case study from which we might extract at least the rudiments of democratic policy making.[9]

THE ARTS OF ENGAGEMENT

1. *Democratic policy makers choose the unglamorous and humble work of creating supportive contexts for incremental school improvement over faddish thinking and self-serving chest beating.* Let's acknowledge this reality straightaway: as in all of politics, the exercise of humility on the part of a policy maker constitutes an act of uncommon courage. Policy makers in education — many of whom are elected and some of whom are appointed by those who are elected — have limited tenures and understandably want to "make their mark." And they are pressured to do so by the repeated trumping up of "educational crises" by think tanks and the mainstream media, which demand quick and decisive action before the U.S. falls behind our global competitors.[10]

This is why so many policy makers opt for ambitious, splashy reforms that do not honor what is already happening in schools or are unrealistic (demanding, say, that all kids be proficient by 2014). Moreover, the turnover of policy makers leads to constant and incoherent shifting of priorities and practices, leaving schools subject to an endless parade of reforms, none of which holds center stage for long. This is a recipe for failure, as it creates an environment of distrust among educators, many of whom reasonably choose either to wait the policies out or, less benignly, to thwart them. Meanwhile, those educators who seek to carry out new policies are soon buried under sedimented reforms.

Unlike other state assessment systems, which rely on tests designed at the "top," Nebraska's STARS is, according to Commissioner Christensen, "bottom-up." That is, the locus of the system is the classroom, where the most important decisions about teaching and learning take place.[11] The principle here is that assessment must be meaningful and useful to teachers and students first. So another way to think about STARS is as an inside-out system: teachers first weave assessment into teaching and learning in the classroom, and then the data obtained from those activities are shared with others. This means that, while STARS has changed how Nebraska educators go about their work, it was built largely on what those educators were already doing in their classrooms.

While STARS has evolved over time, Christensen and his colleagues have ensured that this evolution has been consistent. Even with the incorporation of NCLB requirements into the state system, the basic form and function of Nebraska's system have remained the same. Every change in STARS — whether it's the addition of reporting in a new subject area, a new technical requirement for assessments, or a streamlining of paperwork — is accompanied by a rationale that explains the purpose of the change within the original intent of STARS.

For instance, the state recently moved to onsite review of local assessment processes, allowing its reviewers — a mix of Nebraskans and external consultants — to offer substantive formative feedback in addition to the summative assessment quality rating that has been in place from the beginning of STARS. While this change was implemented to meet NCLB requirements, our researchers found strong support for this new approach among Nebraska educators, not only because educators welcomed the formative feedback, but also because they saw this shift as the next logical step in the evolution of the system. They saw the use of their Nebraska peers as reviewers as a positive step toward making STARS truly "Nebraskan," and they viewed

the increased emphasis on what is actually done with assessments as a useful and smart addition to the process. As an educator at a recent meeting said, "Five years ago, we would not have been ready for this kind of scrutiny, this level of conversation. Today, we welcome it." Like any major change to STARS, this one is understood as falling within the trajectory of an evolving but coherent system.

There is no such thing as a "teacher-proof" policy. Even in a system that seems tightly controlled, teachers have enormous power to mediate policy and bring about results that policy makers had never envisioned.

What holds this system together is the vision at its center — the democratic theory that teachers must be at the forefront and schools must be at the center of school improvement. Nebraska policy makers have been fiercely loyal to that vision even under intense political pressure from the federal government.[12] Eschewing the "quick fix" and the lure of simple but splashy results — a state test, say, that would be likely to show achievement gains just after implementation — Nebraska policy makers have designed a system that they know will need time to mature and that they expect to outlive their tenure. Instead of padding their résumés, they have attempted to build a lasting, *sustainable* system.

2. *Democratic policy makers understand that policy can force change, but not improvement; good policy creates environments in which schools improve themselves.* Here again, humility is crucial: democratic policy makers understand that, while it is possible to change schools by fiat, it is impossible to improve them that way.[13] Policies can prompt changes of various kinds, but unless educators — and teachers in particular — see those changes as beneficial and commit to improvement, they will become merely another occasion for mechanical compliance, outright resistance, or subtle subversion.

Policy makers must reckon with the fact that teachers stand between the intended and actual effects of policies; there is no such thing as a "teacher-proof" policy. Even in a system that seems tightly controlled, teachers have enormous power to mediate policy and bring about results that policy makers had never envisioned. In fact, many studies suggest that teachers' sense of their own professionalism suffers in tightly controlled environments and that this demoralization has a negative effect on student learning.[14] And it's not only teachers' attitudes serving this mediating function. Consider also their interpretation of the meaning of the policy, their ability to carry out the demands of the policy, their relationships with their peers and administrators, the characteristics of the students they serve, and so on. Ultimately, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Allan Glatthorn reached in his review of the research on how policy is put into practice in schools: "Teachers are active makers of policy-in-action and exert their own considerable influence."[15] And from a democratic perspective — one that insists that people should have a say in the decisions that shape their lives — this is not simply an institutional reality, but a healthy feature of school life.

Unfortunately, the policies promulgated by the test-based accountability agenda are not even aimed at promoting teacher engagement; rather, they are aimed at teacher compliance. This explains the emphasis in NCLB on "scientifically based research," which substitutes externally validated methods and programs for teachers' context-dependent professional judgment. Policies that place educational programs and activities in the hands of "experts" outside the school render teachers executors of outsiders' agendas. The focus is on controlling teachers' behavior, rather than on helping them develop their practice.

By contrast, democratic policy making is facilitative; it aims to build educators' capacity for leadership. Nebraska's state policy makers have made teacher leadership a priority, and so STARS is built on facilitative, not punitive, policy. Commissioner Christensen and his staff view their primary purpose not as wielding carrots and sticks but as supporting the schools and building their capacity to improve. They conduct countless school visits; provide hands-on and online assistance to schools and districts struggling with assessment tasks; disseminate clear, easy-to-read STARS updates; provide grants to support local work on assessment; offer portfolio workshops for formative feedback; provide professional development workshops, meetings, and trainings; conduct onsite reviews; and the list goes on. Nebraska policy makers devote the bulk of their resources not to designing controls — to invoke Linda Darling-Hammond's useful distinction — but to building capacity.[16]

3. *Democratic policy makers understand that all schools are different and that all are in need of improvement.* Many policy makers believe that the best way to "level the playing field" — a democratic-sounding goal — is to standardize educational methods and curricula. Certainly, public schools must be funded on an equitable

basis, and care must be taken to turn back the tide of resegregation and the rationing of high-quality teachers and curriculum. But reaching *all children* will require not the standardization of methods and curricula, but rather greater flexibility in meeting students' needs and accommodating their abilities. Indeed, Linda McNeil has found that educational standardization, far from leveling the playing field, actually creates "new forms of discrimination." Specifically, it impoverishes education — refashioning it as test preparation — for the kids who most need high-quality instruction. McNeil concludes that "standardization undermines academic standards and seriously limits opportunities for children to learn to a 'high standard.'"[17]

Democratic policy makers understand that all schools and all children are different and will not progress at the same pace. They understand that teachers' professional training and experience allow them to assess and respond to students' specific needs and learning styles in real time — that is, as they present themselves, not on an arbitrary bureaucratic timetable. They understand that, as Deborah Meier writes, "Every school must have the power and the responsibility to select and design its own particulars and thus surround all youngsters with powerful adults who are in a position to act on their behalf in open and publicly responsible ways."[18]

Moreover, democratic policy makers understand that *all* schools are in need of improvement. Every school can and should improve; school improvement should not be considered a punishment or a sign of deficiency. If policy makers understand school improvement as the goal for all schools, no matter where they start, the question is not "Should this school improve?" but rather "Is this school improving?"[19] Further, each school's improvement will be defined not in relation to other schools but in relation to its own past performance. As respected psychometrician Robert Linn suggests, school-to-school comparisons are "inherently unfair" because it is impossible to isolate the influence of school factors from the influence of nonschool factors in such analyses. Linn recommends that policy makers "place more emphasis on comparisons of performance from year to year rather than from school to school. This allows for differences in starting points while maintaining an expectation of improvement for all."[20]

As Nebraska's Christensen has insisted since the inception of STARS, the purpose of the system is to generate *ratings*, not *rankings*. In fact, he has said numerous times that ranking schools undermines the entire system. This premise is reflected in the way the Nebraska Department of Education displays school assessment data. The Nebraska Department of Education publishes an annual school "report card" (in English and Spanish) that includes a wealth of state-, district-, and school-level information on student performance on multiple measures (local math, reading, social studies, and science assessments; the statewide writing assessment; norm-referenced tests; adequate yearly progress); district assessment quality; teacher and student demographics; attendance, dropout, and graduation rates; and more. The online report card allows users to compare up to five districts according to their characteristics, assessment quality ratings, student performance on standards (reported by grade level and various special populations, including special education, English-language learners, gender, race, and poverty), student performance on national tests, and adequate yearly progress status. This rich storehouse of data offers a complex portrait of each school and district as well as the state itself — but it does not provide the means to construct a simple ranking of schools.[21]

Nebraska teachers and administrators report to our researchers that it has been difficult to wean their communities — and especially their local media — away from what Peter Sacks calls "the powerful elegance of a single number."[22] But they persist in educating their constituents about the complexity of their schools rather than feeding them simple numbers. As one superintendent pointed out, rank-ordering leads to the impression that only some schools — those on the bottom — need to improve, when in fact the goal is that "we all improve." This democratic sentiment is at the heart of Nebraska's approach to school improvement.

4. *Democratic policy makers seek to improve their own capacity to support school improvement — starting with learning to listen to educators.* When school "reform" fails, as it so often does, educators become scapegoats. They are characterized as resistant, lazy, and unwilling to change. Few observers interrupt their finger-pointing long enough to wonder whether the whole approach to school reform — and particularly policy makers' reliance on carrots and sticks — needs to change.

Democratic policy makers understand that they have a responsibility to *help* schools and educators improve, not just to demand results in return for funding or flexibility — neither of which tend to be delivered at the levels promised anyway. Democratic policy makers operate on what Richard Elmore calls the "reciprocity principle," which recognizes that every responsibility required by a policy maker triggers an "equal and corresponding" responsibility for that policy maker.[23] In other words, policy makers must improve their own capacity in order to help improve the capacity of educators. This begins with developing a rich understand-

ing of how schools work, not just how policy makers might wish they worked. What kind of training and ongoing professional development will educators need to improve schools? What kinds of structures are conducive to the development of engaging school cultures? What kinds of supports promote educators' commitment to the work of school improvement? These questions are too rarely asked by policy makers, who traditionally have been content to provide dispensations with one hand and controls with the other.

As longtime classroom teachers themselves, Commissioner Christensen and key members of his staff bring an educator's perspective to STARS. In 1998, as state testing was sweeping the country, they made their case to the Nebraska legislature for a state assessment system that would be built on local assessments. They lost. The legislature mandated a single state test.

Fortunately, the governor cut funding for the bill, which allowed Christensen and his colleagues to lobby for their vision. They marshaled the support of measurement experts who enumerated the problems with and limitations of standardized, high-stakes tests. They shared what was happening in other states. And they documented the high quality of what was happening in Nebraska schools, pointing to strong teaching and learning across the state. Ultimately, the legislature changed course. In the spring of 2000, it passed Legislative Bill 812, which paved the way for STARS.[24] What is remarkable about this story is the way the commissioner and his colleagues in the state department embodied, learned about, and represented the perspective of educators. They asked the question so few educators hear from policy makers: How can we help?

And, of course, they listened. As Andy Hargreaves argues, it's not enough to "witness" what happens in schools; those who wish to understand schools "must also listen to the voice of the teacher, to the person it expresses and to the purposes it articulates."[25] This does not mean allowing teachers to testify at a hearing whose outcome is preordained, tolerating a token teacher or two on a stray committee, or fielding a few questions from teachers after lecturing them for an hour. Rather, it means attempting to understand and appreciate teachers' experiences and perspectives in the spirit of generosity and humility. It means seeking shared understanding without insisting on total agreement.

Few policy makers listen to educators this way — perhaps because anti-teacher forces tell them that all they will hear, if they do, are "murmuring excuses."[26] But the urgent task, the solemn responsibility, for policy makers in a democratic republic is to learn to listen to educators so that they can help create environments in which — and provide tools with which — teachers may competently, responsibly, and professionally practice their art.

As our research in Nebraska has shown, teachers will rise to the occasion when given the tools, time, and trust to do their jobs.[27] On the whole, they have bought into STARS because they have been participants in that process from the beginning. It is their instruction that drives assessment, rather than the other way around. And at the state level, they are always well represented at the policy-making table, from the Commissioner's Advisory Committee to policy partner forums to special meetings and workshops. Again and again, educators around the state testify to our researchers that state department staff members — and particularly the commissioner himself and the Statewide Assessment Office, led by Pat Roschewski — are engaged and responsive listeners. No education policy decision is reached in Nebraska without first listening to the perspectives of the educators who will live with the results of those decisions every day.

That said, I should note that the Nebraska Department of Education has not always found it easy to increase its own capacity. As an organization, it is hardly immune to the kinds of limitations Susan Follett Lusi found in her study of state departments of education.[28] Like its counterparts elsewhere, it has traditionally been a top-down bureaucracy whose institutional structures and practices stifle innovations at least as often as they stimulate them. So it struggles, for instance, to integrate its relatively young assessment office into the more established areas of the department. Its halting attempts at reorganization provide further evidence of Lusi's con-

clusion that state departments are slow to learn and that fundamentally hierarchical ways of operating are especially difficult to unlearn. Still, like other state departments Lusi studied, the Nebraska Department of Education is shifting from a primarily regulatory organization to a primarily facilitative organization, and its staff is committed to growing the capacity to facilitate the work of schools.

WANTED: DEMOCRATIC POLICY MAKERS

As we move further into the 21st century, one of our most pressing tasks is to revitalize the democratic mission of public schools, not only by changing how and what they teach and learn, but also by changing how they operate. In this brief article, I have outlined just a few starting points for our thinking about the kind of democratic policy making that promotes schools that really are "democracy's workshops" — schools of, for, and by the people, dedicated to the arts of engagement.

I have no illusions that the kind of policy maker I have in mind is easy to find or, once found, to nurture. A democratic policy maker, after all, must have both the humility and the courage to give up the role of lone visionary. Instead, he or she must commit to fostering and acting on good ideas through collaboration with those charged to live with them. This kind of vision-building takes patience and humility. But, along with eternal vigilance, those are the prices of democracy. In a democratic republic, our best, most enduring vision for public education — and our best hope for a better century than the one just past — is democracy on the march at home, and that begins in our schools.

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1. Gerald W. Bracey, *The War Against America's Public Schools* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2002).

2. Deborah Meier, *In Schools We Trust* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), p. 176.

3. John Dewey, "Democracy in Education," in *Education Today*, John Ratner, ed. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1940), p. 64.

4. Ibid., p. 65.

5. See Chris W. Gallagher, *Reclaiming Assessment: A Better Alternative to the Accountability Agenda* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2007).

6. These well-documented consequences include the narrowing and rationing of curriculum, teacher and student disengagement, increasing (but underreported) dropout rates, decreasing (but overreported) graduation rates, growing retention rates in grades preceding high-stakes testing, and cheating.

7. See Pat Roschewski, Jody Isernhagen, and Leon Dappen, "Nebraska STARS: Achieving Results," *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 2006, pp. 433-37; Eric D. Turley, "Textural Perceptions of Time," *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 2006, pp. 438-42, 447; Chris W. Gallagher, "A Seat at the Table," *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2000, pp. 502-7; idem, "Turning the Accountability Tables," *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 2004, pp. 352-60; Pat Roschewski, "Nebraska STARS Line Up," *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2003, pp. 517-20; and Pat Roschewski, with Chris Gallagher and Jody Isernhagen, "Nebraskans Reach for the STARS," *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2001, pp. 611-15.

8. Douglas Christensen, press conference remarks, Lincoln, Nebraska, November 2001.

9. Copies of the annual reports of the Comprehensive Evaluation Project, housed at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, may be found at www.nde.state.ne.us/stars/STARSTechnicalReports.htm.

10. See, for example, a staff editorial, "Why the Achievement Gap Persists," *New York Times*, 8 December 2006, p. A-30.

11. Douglas Christensen, "Building State Assessment from the Classroom Up," *School Administrator*, December 2001, www.aasa.org/publications/saarticledetail.cfm?ItemNumber=2746.

12. At the time of this writing, Nebraska had won conditional approval under NCLB for its state system — after a long and very public disagreement with federal officials. See www.nde.state.ne.us/1STARSNCLB/STARSandUSDE.htm.

13. See Roland S. Barth, *Learning by Heart* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), p. xxii. In *School Reform from the Inside Out* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), Richard Elmore makes a similar point: "Internal accountability precedes external accountability and is a precondition for any process of improvement" (p. 114).

14. See Linda M. McNeil, *Contradictions of School Reform* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Andy Hargreaves et al., *Learning to Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001); and Patricia A. Wasley, *Teachers Who Lead* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991). McNeil found that in highly standardized environments, teachers resort to "defensive teaching," striking a deal with students: I won't ask much of you, and you won't give me any grief. Hargreaves and his colleagues cite multiple studies conducted in England and Wales revealing that prescriptive environments lead teachers to feel less confident, "cynically compliant," and depressed. Similarly, Wasley found that teachers in controlled environments in turn become controlling themselves — and isolated from and distrustful of their colleagues.

15. Allan A. Glatthorn, "From Policy to Practice: The Research," in idem and Jean Fontana, eds., *Coping with Standards, Tests, and Accountability: Voices from the Classroom* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 2000), p.18.

16. Linda Darling-Hammond, *The Right to Learn* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), p.6.

17. McNeil, p. 6.

18. Meier, p. 166.

19. Elmore, p. 237.

20. Robert Linn, "Assessments and Accountability," *Educational Researcher*, March 2000, p. 15.

21. See http://reportcard.nde.state.ne.us/main/home.aspx.

22. Peter Sacks, *Standardized Minds* (New York: Perseus Books, 1999), p. 69.

23. Elmore, p. 68.

24. Roschewski, op. cit.

25. Hargreaves, p. 249; see also Barth, p. 62.

26. Chester E. Finn, Jr., "Why the U.S. Has the World's Dimmest Bright Kids," *Wall Street Journal*, 25 February 1998.

27. See Gallagher, *Reclaiming Assessment*; and the annual reports of the Comprehensive Evaluation Project.

28. Susan Follett Lusi, *The Role of State Departments of Education in Complex School Reform* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); see also Susan Follett Lusi and Patricia Davis Goldberg, "A New Mission for the Department of Education," in Roger S. Pankrantz and Joseph M. Petrosko, eds., *All Children Can Learn* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).