Reclaiming Assessment

CHRIS W. GALLAGHER

Reclaiming Assessment

A Better Alternative to the Accountability Agenda

Foreword by **DEBORAH MEIER**

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

Heinemann
A division of Reed Elsevier Inc.
361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801–3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Gallagher, Chris W.
Reclaiming assessment : a better alternative to the accountability agenda / Chris W. Gallagher.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN–13: 978-0-325-00918-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)
ISBN–10: 0-325-00918-X
1. Educational evaluation—United States. 2. Educational accountability—United States. I. Title.
LB2822.75.G35 2007
379.1'58—dc22 2006030207

Editor: Jim Strickland
Production: Lynne Costa
Cover design: Night & Day Design
Typesetter: Gina Poirier Design
Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
11 10 09 08 07 VP 1 2 3 4 5

To Cady and Erin

Peace and passion, always

Contents

	Foreword	ix
	Acknowledgments	xiii
1	Introduction: Reforming Reform	1
2	Accountability and After	14
3	Teachers at the Lead, Schools in the Center: The Nebraska Story	33
4	Engaging Students: Making Assessment Meaningful in the Classroom	55
5	Engaging Colleagues: Creating New Models of Professional Development	78
6	Engaging Community Members: Extending the Conversation	100
	Conclusion: Reclaiming the Profession	122
	References	129
	Index	141

Foreword

Lately I've been struck by the flood of messages in the daily news reminding us that we've missed the boat in trying to reform schools on the failed model of business accountability—whether on a micro level (the shop floor) or on a macro level (where all the bookkeeping scandals are daily exposed). The news, in short, is discouraging.

We are sacrificing engagement, "the heart and soul of education," says Chris Gallagher in this remarkable and important book, *Reclaiming Assessment*. The loss of engagement probably isn't good for the workplace, and it's fatal for political democracy.

"Workers want to be fully engaged" and business "needs a system more compatible with democratic rule," Traci Fenton tells us in the *Christian Science Monitor* ("Democracy in the Workplace," August 23, 2006). Could the current mania for standardization, supported by all the business roundtables and corporate leaders, be just a short-term fad?

Nebraska is betting it is. Teachers, with the support of the state of Nebraska, have taken the idea of accountability and turned it on its head. They have argued that democracy and high standards are tied together, and both require just what Traci Fenton argues for: full engagement and opportunities to "express" oneself "while making a contribution that matters."

Maybe our schools—if given a chance—could even teach business a thing or two about accountability. But it won't happen unless we concern ourselves with what we mean by being *well educated*. It's what we've ignored for years. It's that which lies at the heart of the work Nebraska has undertaken by slowly and systematically insisting that each and every community take responsibility for developing its own definition as well as the ways in which to measure it.

What leads us to keep kids in this artificial environment for so many of their most lively and curious years at an enormous public cost? It had better be important and compelling to citizens and kids alike. But until we challenge each and every community to start thinking about this, it's hard to see how we can expect kids to take their education seriously—as something more than a hurdle we've

placed in their path. Because, whatever we think their purpose might be, schools do have an impact. Becoming a good worker—for both the political and the economic health of the nation—can't wait until kids leave school to take hold. If we leave the definition of *good worker* blank, we are endangering the work to be done. Much of our future as a nation is being decided by what happens to children between birth and age eighteen. Teaching our children to become adults is what schools are all about, and a citizenry and workforce trained for fourteen or more years to be passive and bored won't be easily turned around. Yet there is no observer of our schools for the past half century who'd deny that schooling in America is just that: boor-ring and passive. We forget that the idea of spending all of one's preadult life learning to be an adult via formal schooling is a very recent innovation, and an odd one at that. For most of the history of our species, one learned to be an adult in and among the adult community one was preparing to join, engaged at various levels in the real tasks of adulthood. Becoming a grown-up, for good or ill, was learned by observing and joining with grown-ups.

Our schools are not organized for such engagement between kids and adults. Most kids are, as a result, engaged only during the two to four minutes between classes, at lunch and recess time, and whenever they can sneak it in without being caught—like trips to the bathroom. And their engagement is almost exclusively with their own peer world and the huge adult industry that has developed to cater to such peer groups, to turn them into insatiable consumers and, in the process, "teach" them, shape their thinking and tastes.

Yes, the impatient reformers are right that the current system is a hard system to change, but it's unclear whether the supposed reformers really want to change it or just make it tighter and more rigid. The evidence is for the latter. President Reagan's Commission for Excellence in Education initiated the modern wave of reform in 1983 with a rather astounding claim, one that Gallagher notes early on: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." Unfortunately, this mediocrity continues to be the case, but it is now mandated under the auspices of precisely those who made this alarmist claim.

It's no accident that virtually no teachers were members of that commission (save one, allows Chris). Thus the commission lost sight of the fact that "teachers are the means, the relationship with students is the vehicle, and professional judgment is the tool" of higher stan-

dards, as Chris notes. And thus the inexorable detour we have taken, the wasted time and resources, has led us into No Child Left Behind's insane implementation. The driving force of the NCLB reform is the belief that parents and teachers are the "unfriendly foreign power" and that the expertise belongs to unelected leaders removed from the scene who promise education's salvation.

The dramatic shift from local to centralized expert federal control has not occurred without resistance. We are, among other things, not a passive species at heart, and our political system is still sufficiently intact and robust to not roll over easily. Even if we teachers and parents have been attacked by friend and foe alike for resisting reform, we forget at our peril that our capacity for resisting is our true salvation. So, teachers and parents still resist new ideas. Collaboration must be voluntary and purposive to be powerful, not just an act of going along or getting along or saving one's job. We can urge kids and parents (and teachers) to be better citizens, more compliant, but if their citizenship consists of the right to vote only yes, it may turn out that the imposed reforms are as easily swept away as the reforms of the once mighty USSR.

Reclaiming Assessment was written to tell the story of a whole state that resisted going along with policies that undermined the very strengths of its educational system and the very basic premise of its local political ideal—that "we the people" know best. Of course, we the people don't always agree with me, and at present most Nebraskans haven't strayed very far from their traditional ways in either schooling or accounting. We're not natural revolutionaries, and changes take time to root and cannot be force-fed. We learn best by persuasion and good example—which is what good education itself is all about. And it's what the author of this book forces us to consider above all by his clear and lively grasp of the daily details of how it might work if we took it seriously—as seriously as Nebraska has.

Our leaders can put out reams of pages touting miraculous results built on changes imposed overnight, tales of kids and teachers overcoming all the odds under the influence of high-stakes tests and well-funded innovations, and have still changed absolutely nothing for real. There's a test rise here and a drop there. Five or ten years later, nothing remains—except resistance for the next wave of imposed reform. And all too often the statistical mumbo jumbo regarding both past failure and current success consists merely of artifacts of ingenious statisticians. Humans can be ornery and pigheaded. But if we undermine their power to control their own destiny, what we're

left with is a society that cannot teach its young about the value of good ideas, much less anything about the power of democracy. A well-educated public might best be judged by its capacity to distinguish real from phony statistics.

"If we want our children to become empowered adults, who use their minds well, who can stand behind their own ideas, while simultaneously being willing to listen and be influenced by the ideas of others, they must be surrounded by adults who engage in and model such behavior" (Nicholas Meier, 2005, AERA), and who most importantly do so day in and day out—in the presence of the young.

Means and ends sometimes fit well together, and if Nebraska can survive the pressures, it may indeed lead the way . . . over time. In the meantime, we all can learn a lot from its efforts, its steady and modest and honest exploration of how best to hold ourselves accountable for our ideas and our practices. Chris Gallagher has brilliantly laid out the story for us; now it's up to us to act on it.

—Deborah Meier

Acknowledgments

Of all the smart, pithy things that have been said about writing, none is smarter or pithier than the gem my friend Steve North offers up: "Learning to write is hard, and it takes a long time." Indeed. But writers who listen—and I hope I am learning, finally, to be such a writer—are never alone. If they listen with just the right mix of humility and courage, they join a chorus of voices, rising as one. Among those who have humbled me just enough to listen and emboldened me just enough to sing are the following:

The Nebraska educators who were kind enough to share their (scant) time and (abundant) insight with our Comprehensive Evaluation Project researchers.

The Nebraska educators who contributed their own wonderful work to this book: Edward Montgomery, Suzanne Ratzlaff, Laura Miller, Teresa Frields, and Julie Dutton (special thanks as well to administrators par excellence Keith Rohwer and Jef Johnston).

The Nebraska educators at the Nebraska Department of Education, especially Doug Christensen and Pat Roschewski, courageous defenders of the democratic faith and the right to learn for all children.

The Comprehensive Evaluation Project researchers and assistants, especially the eminently capable Susan Wilson.

Monty Neill, fighter of the good fight.

Lois Bridges, who initially acquired this project and helped me believe in its potential.

Gloria Pipkin, hands down the best editor I have ever known—my friend, my comrade, my muse.

Jim Strickland, who stepped in at the last minute but brought with him the hard-earned wisdom of a longtime fellow traveler.

Several wonderful administrators at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) who have supported me in what is for an English professor an unlikely and perhaps odd endeavor: Stephen Hilliard, Linda Pratt, Joy Ritchie, and Dick Hoffmann.

The readers of various drafts of this book, who have offered thoughtful and generous response: Shari Stenberg, Molly Gallagher,

Erica Rogers, Eric Turley, Heinemann's anonymous reviewers, and the members of UNL's Composition Colloquium.

And of course the most beautiful voices in the chorus that is my life, those who have taught me what it means to listen: Molly, Cady, and Erin.

Recently, Cady made a solemn pronouncement: "Dad, you can't sing." Maybe so. But defiantly—and really, what better way is there?—I sing the praises of all those mentioned here (including you, Cady G.), with the hope that my voice, however thin, conveys something of the warm gratitude I feel toward them.

The writing of this book was supported by a Faculty Development Leave from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

1 Introduction
Reforming Reform

Curriculum Night, Cady's Middle School

Ms. L. is offering her well-rehearsed spiel on the sixth-grade curriculum. She has fifteen minutes before the bell rings and we parents are herded off to another room for another teacher presentation. (Is it science or math at 7:35? We'll need to consult our schedule before we leave this room; the passing period is only five minutes.) I'm struggling to keep up, but some of it sounds good: discussion circles, response journals, research projects. Some of it, though, sounds decidedly less good: cursive worksheets, vocabulary lists, multiple-choice spelling tests.

Ms. L. is more efficient than some of her peers, who—so far—have left time after their presentations for only the briefest of questions, if any at all. *(What can we do to help them with homework? Just stay on them. Should they be bringing home their books every night? Not if they don't have homework from the book.)* I shoot my hand up. I think I hear Molly take a deep breath. (Perhaps she is wondering how successfully I will be able to translate our real questions—*Why the hell is our sixth grader doing cursive worksheets for homework every night? What's with the multiple-choice spelling tests?*—into polite fare.)

"First of all," I say, "I like a lot of what I've heard tonight and I appreciate your time. But we"—and here, with a back-and-forth hand gesture, I generously implicate Molly—"have a couple concerns about the kind of work Cady's being asked to do."

Ms. L. nods, smiles, invites me to continue. "You can ask me about anything," she offers cheerfully.

I continue. "OK. Specifically, we're wondering about the purpose of the cursive worksheets and the multiple-choice spelling tests. It seems strange that they're doing those things in sixth grade."

Ms. L., unflappable: "OK, the cursive writing is a district expectation. That's just for review and we're almost done. They just finished R. The spelling tests are to prepare the kids for the tests they'll have to take. They'll need to know that format to do well on tests."

Still smiling, she asks, "Does that answer your question?"

Defeated, I admit that it does.

Parent-Teacher Conference, Erin's Kindergarten

Ms. H. is telling us a story about how Erin and her friends formed the Nature Club in the new playground. In the hands of a less skilled observer of children, it would be a typical, if charming, story about kids scheming and dreaming. In Ms. H.'s hands, it becomes a story that teaches: the way the children chose the perfect location shows their growing awareness of spatial relationships; the way they worked out the rules for membership shows their increasing sophistication in social relationships; the way they dug tunnels in the piles of wood chips shows how they are developing initiative and using language to work together.

Stories that teach are the stock-in-trade of Ms. H. and her colleagues. As parents, we have seen it again and again: through gentle questioning, the teacher leads the child to tell what she already knows but doesn't *know* she knows. *(How are these two leaves different? What can you tell me about their shape?)* The teacher builds on the child's ideas, slyly adding new information, new ways to think about the problem or question at hand, and the child quickly incorporates these into her own inquiry. *(Yes, well done: those are called veins. See how they form different patterns? Does that make you think that they come from the same kind of tree or different kinds?)* The child walks away with a new understanding but also faith in herself: She knows a lot. She will share what she knows with the other children. *(See? These are veins—like the veins in your hand.)* The teacher, meanwhile, walks away with a new understanding of how the child's mind and heart work. This understanding will become a story that teaches for her colleagues. *(Listen to what this child said; here is what I am coming to understand about her.)* Ms. H. and her colleagues spend more time with each other than other teachers we've known. And it shows: they teach each other how to tell and how to listen to stories that teach.

Her eyes shining, Ms. H. turns our attention to Erin's portfolio: a three-ring binder in which Erin and Ms. H. have collected a variety of artifacts that display Erin's learning. First, a series of photographs. Erin and friends arriving at school, posing in front of their wood-chip tunnel, designing their nature club. Each picture becomes an occasion for a detailed description of how the children learn to work together, how they use their imaginations, how they solve problems.

Next, a set of observations, written by Ms. H. An example:

Observation	**Key Experience(s)**
11-9—Erin and Ashley presented flannel board stories to the rest of the group after they finished lunch. Some children were still eating, so one child suggested that they were at a "dinner theater." The two stories presented were (1) Goldilocks and the Three Bears and (2) Dinosaur Land.	Initiative Social Relations Language Creative Representation

Each observation records a mere moment: the kids choreographing a dance, building houses and towers with stacking bricks, jumping rope during gym time, taking pride in each other's accomplishments, designing games, and so on. But each moment, perceived by an educator who knows how to watch children, becomes a "key experience."

Finally, a sampling of Erin's artwork. Sketches of playground structures. A monarch butterfly. A series of self-portraits: Erin in tall prairie grass, Erin in a wheat field ("My hair is golden like wheat and it's blending in"), Erin in her Halloween costume, Erin at her grandparents' house for Christmas. Characters from books she's read. Diagrams of classrooms. A menagerie: a bunny, a weasel eating a mouse, a squirrel, a beaver. Her family on a tram in the St. Louis Gateway Arch. And there's writing as well: the alphabet, numbers up to one hundred (more or less), several word families *(an, can, pan, dan, man),* other random words she knows *(mom, dad, go, on, off, pop, Erin, Cady).* And again, each image, each word, inspires Ms. H. to offer another story, further insight. "Notice," she says, "how much more detailed her self-portraits have become in the last couple months." "And see," she says, "how she's experimenting with scale with these two drawings, one large and one small."

By the time Ms. H. closes the portfolio, she has revealed for us an Erin whom we recognize but could not have described ourselves. Somehow, she has brought us closer to our own child. And that is her goal. ("Ask her about this," she says; "Have her tell you about the time…")

Ms. H. uses our time together to deepen her own understanding of Erin as well. "Is she like this at home?" she asks. "When she is in this situation, does she usually respond by…?" We do our best to respond in kind: to tell Ms. H. stories that will help reveal an even more complex Erin than the one she knows. We are less competent observers of children than Ms. H., but we share with her a keen interest in Erin's growth.

The conference is only twenty minutes long—just a moment, really. But for us, as parents, it is a key experience.

On Listening (to) Teachers

This book is the result of years of research in public schools, years of reading and thinking about school reform, years of writing and rewriting. But I choose to begin with two intimate moments from my life as a parent because they help keep me grounded. They help me remember what is important about schools, what is at stake in schooling.

For the past several years, it has been my job to listen to teachers—hundreds of them. And when I listen to them talk about their work, I think often of my daughters' teachers. For example, when I hear teachers describe how their lives are defined by the mandates of others—the laws, statutes, contracts, policies, provisions, rules, guidelines, checklists, rubrics, matrices, grids, charts, and graphs that regulate their relationships with kids—I think of Ms. L.

At the time, I must confess, I was merely frustrated by what I took to be Ms. L.'s evasion of my serious parental concern about my daughter's education. But over time, I have come to see that a variety of forces conspired to shut down the conversation we could have had with Ms. L. In fact, Ms. L. was doing her job, precisely as she and her superiors understood it. And despite my brief and ineffectual challenge to the script, we parents, too, dutifully played our appointed roles. Ms. L.'s task on curriculum night was to provide *accountability*, in the form of a rational, efficient, and clear explanation of our daughter's curriculum—an account. In turn, our job was to take in the information, maybe offer up a clarifying question or two, and move on. We weren't supposed to talk *with* Ms. L.; we were supposed to be talked *to* by her. Account-ability is a one-way street.

More disturbing yet, this one-way street is paved by the unquestioned authority of effectively anonymous folks remote from the scene of teaching and learning: in this case, district administrators and test makers (though we could certainly add state and federal policymakers, school "reformers," textbook companies, and a host of others). Everything about that night at the middle school—from the inflexible, ridiculously tight schedule to the canned spiels to Ms. L.'s party-line answers—taught us what the kids and the teachers in this school already knew: *they* control things around here; we do not.

I am haunted by the conversation I did not have with Ms. L. In the end, though, it's not my defeated silence I want most to overcome, but hers. The saddest part of this whole affair for me is that we never did hear Ms. L.'s voice. I have a strong suspicion that much of the time, Ms. L. feels much like I did that night: talked to, but not listened to.

But sometimes, I *do* hear teachers' voices, and when this happens, I find myself moved by their careful observations of children, their rich descriptions of teaching and learning, their insightful conversations—their stories that teach. At these times, I think of Ms. H. and her colleagues and how they invite others—children, each other, and parents—into meaningful conversations. They understand the importance of partnerships, of working together to support students' growth. They don't merely do the bidding of remote experts; they put children's learning where it belongs: in the hands of the children and those closest to them, parents and teachers. In doing so, they go well beyond providing an *account* of their curriculum; they *engage* kids and their various educational partners.

Engagement, these teachers have taught me, starts with listening. Teachers are their best teaching selves when they are listening to their students. Although we tend to think of listening as passive, merely receptive, serious listening entails responsibility and reciprocity. It requires diligence, discipline, and a willingness to think from perspectives other than our own. It is hard work. It is the work of teaching, this business of taking other people seriously.

In turn, listening to *teachers*, taking them seriously, ought to be the work of anyone who thinks she has something important to say about education. If this book has anything of value to contribute to teachers' work or to their understanding of that work, it is because every idea, suggestion, and example in the book is drawn from the work of actual teachers in actual classrooms and schools.

The research that informs this book was conducted in the state of Nebraska under the auspices of the Comprehensive Evaluation Project (CEP), a university-based evaluation of Nebraska's standards, assessment, and accountability system (more about this system in a moment). I have served as coordinator of the CEP since 2001. Since that time, we have interviewed more than five hundred and surveyed approximately four thousand Nebraska teachers, administrators, and local school board members. We also have observed dozens of meetings, workshops, and inservices around the state and contracted with educational researchers to conduct statistical studies. (For a more thorough overview of the CEP, see Chapter 3.) But our most important

task was to gather voices from the field: to understand what was happening in Nebraska schools from the perspectives of teachers. This book, then, is my best effort to make sense of what my colleagues and I hear when we listen to teachers.

Getting the Wrong Idea

Few so-called reformers are listening to teachers these days. Instead, they treat teachers as executors of the designs of remote "experts": policymakers, administrators, politicians, university researchers, test makers, textbook companies. As a result, teachers spend their days rendering unto Caesar rather than tending to their students. They are made to feed the system because the system, goodness knows, must be fed.

And yet, teachers remain the target of reformers' self-serving agendas: the problem, not the solution, to what ails the schools. The "education establishment," we are told, cannot reform itself; it must be reformed from the outside. No need to listen to teachers; all we will hear are excuses and whining.

This kind of antiteacher thinking buttresses school reform as a remote-control activity. Although educational history is littered with failed programs that imagined school reform as a *technical problem*, not a *people problem*,[1] reformers stubbornly insist that the way to reform schools is to "design controls," as Linda Darling-Hammond puts it, rather than "develop capacity" (1997, 6). Nowhere is this clearer than in the astounding vigor with which proponents of high-stakes testing pursue their Holy Grail–like quest for the Perfect Test. Surely, they seem to think, if we could just get the specs right . . .

The principal argument of this book is that the current accountability-through-high-stakes-testing approach to school reform is all wrong. In an era defined by the sweeping No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and the implementation of high-stakes state testing in almost every state,[2] this claim might sound heretical, or at least childishly obstinate. Who actually *wants* to leave children behind? Who refuses to see that testing, as President Bush has intoned on more than one occasion, is "the cornerstone of education reform"?[3] But we forget that these "commonsense" questions emerge from a particular perspective, a peculiar logic—an agenda. And it's an agenda, I will argue, that is doing grave damage to our schools and our democratic republic.

Accountability logic is rather simple—and familiar: Schools must prove to those who pay the bills—taxpayers as well as parents, who invest human capital—that they are a good investment. And they

must do so by performing well in a competitive market. They must show *results*, expressed in terms of achievement scores (account-ants need numbers). If they underperform, they must adopt the practices of higher performers (i.e., standardize). Complacent or incompetent workers (teachers) must be retooled or let go. Efficiency and economy must be paramount. All of these demands are leveraged by the imposition of incentives and disincentives. A stern hand is needed; direction must come from the top. Compliance equals success; just do as you are told.

Although this business model is often presented by its adherents as good old-fashioned American common sense, a number of critics have emerged to question its application to public schooling. School reform researchers are skeptical of the claims made for top-down, compliance-based school reform. Recent studies show that states with high-stakes tests are *not* seeing the kinds of student achievement gains promised by proponents of the accountability agenda. Instead, those testing regimes are spawning a wide array of unintended negative consequences, including mishandlings and misuses of test data; severely narrowed or watered-down curricula; a sense of impotence and alienation among teachers; student apathy and disengagement; public mistrust; emphasis on raising test scores even at the expense of meaningful learning; kids dropping out or being pushed out at key testing moments; and more. Perhaps most disturbingly, high-stakes testing is making it all the more likely that the students who most need rich, engaging instruction—particularly kids living in poverty and racial minorities—will in fact get little more than intensive test prep. However noble the rhetoric of No Child Left Behind might seem, it is proving to be a disaster for kids'—and teachers'—civil rights.

Meanwhile, state legislatures (Utah's and Virginia's, for instance), teachers' unions, and advocacy organizations such as FairTest have opposed the law. Parent and student activist networks (such as Cambridge Parents Against MCAS and Students Against Testing) have sprung up around the country to oppose the way in which standardized testing systematically discriminates against certain groups of students. Educators have stepped forward to testify that top-down standards, assessment, and accountability systems undermine their professionalism and create school environments that prize winning over learning. Even the psychometric community, which has much to gain by the current high-stakes testing craze, has warned about the severe limitations and unintended consequences of standardized tests, especially when high stakes are attached.

In short, lots of people think NCLB and its emphasis on high-stakes testing are a bad idea. But few observers have challenged the idea of accountability itself. Most seem hopeful of finding new and improved methods of holding schools accountable. My argument goes deeper: Accountability itself is a bad idea. It is a one-way responsibility model premised on *trans*actions rather than *inter*actions. It is about getting what you pay for and paying for what you get. Certainly, there is a *kind* of mutuality here, but it is severely constrained—as it is in all commercial transactions—by bottom-line self-interest. One's participation in transactions is motivated by what one owes or is not owed—not by a shared commitment to a valuable cooperative effort. This approach might serve us well in many areas of life: shopping or dining at restaurants, for instance. But it will not do in public schooling, where we are dealing not with the manufacturing, buying, or selling of commodities, but with the care and keeping of human beings.

We need a better idea.

Getting a Clue

Picture the following newspaper headline: "The accountability movement is dead." The subheading might go something like this: "Teachers and students reclaim public education, usher in new era of school 'reform.'"

Hard to imagine? Maybe so. This kind of momentous shift in the way we think about school reform is unlikely to happen all at once. But as I suggested earlier, the shift has begun. The voices of protest grow ever louder and the hunger for a better way grows more intense. At the risk of sounding faux prophetic, I submit that the next generation of school reform is on its way.

What will this twenty-first-century approach look like? For the most part, we can only guess. My hunch—and my hope—is that the new model will turn the old one inside out. It will dismiss accountability as its guiding principle and adopt instead the more robust concept of *engagement*. Its aim will be to nurture mutually responsible partnerships that are not reducible to bottom-line transactions (a compliance approach), but are instead marked by rich and dialogic interactions (a commitment approach). It will return teaching and learning to teachers and students. It will give teachers the tools and the trust they need to practice their art. It will put the public back in public schools by emphasizing the building of democratic relation-

ships. Indeed, it will make democracy both the *means* of learning (what teachers and students do) and the *object* of learning (what teachers and students learn about). It will create schools that honor the fundamental democratic principle that people ought to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. It will take seriously the notion that schools are not competitive organizations but rather, as Paul Theobald says, agents for the restoration of community (1997, 2).

As my imagined newspaper subheading suggests, teachers and students will lead the way because it is on their interaction that the whole enterprise of schooling hinges. If schools are where young people learn democracy—where they learn to be democratic citizens—then their relationships with their teachers and peers are paramount. These relationships must be built around a shared commitment to teaching and learning, not on compliance to laws and policies promulgated by remote, effectively anonymous others.

But teachers and students alone cannot fashion engaging schools. A school cut off from the community in which it operates cannot be an engaging school. As Ms. H. taught us, educating Erin (or Johnny or Susie...) requires a network of support inside and outside the school. Schools can function as "workshops of democracy" as Gerald Bracey (2002, 104) (after Benjamin Barber) calls them, only if they are of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Fortunately, a number of networks and organizations devoted to creating engaging schools and school systems have emerged in recent years. These include the Coalition of Essential Schools, the National Coalition of Education Activists, the National Network for Educational Renewal, FairTest, and others. These networks and organizations provide useful resources and heartening examples of teachers, students, and communities working together to improve schools. But at the same time, we are seeing very little such work at the *state* level, where the dominant posture is resigned compliance. Those doing the good work of these organizations and alliances find themselves swimming against the stiff tide of top-down state requirements designed to do the bidding of an even more top-down federal government.

If we are to realize a twenty-first-century approach to school reform, we will need to return to John Dewey's fundamental principle of democratic education: that we must provide for *all* children the quality of education the "best and wisest" parent wants for her child ([1900] 1956, 3). In a democratic society, engaging education is not the privilege of the few; it is the right of all. This does not mean—as it does under accountability regimes—that one size fits all; what Dewey

was talking about could not be further from standardized, high-stakes testing regimes. Instead, he saw the need to create systems in which knowledgeable professionals practiced their art adaptively and students learned in ways that honored their individual and social-group differences.

Charting by Nebraska's STARS

Maybe this engagement idea sounds pie-in-the-sky. Wishful thinking. A dream. But I'll demonstrate in Chapters 2 and 3 that engagement is a much more reasonable and appropriate approach to school reform than is accountability. Accountability is neither natural nor inevitable. In fact, embedded in it is a worldview that runs counter to the mission and nature of public education.

But as much as I might wish that engagement were such a profoundly and self-evidently good idea that teachers, policymakers, and everyone else would drop this harmful fascination with accountability, I know that's not going to happen. The history of school reform is full of good ideas (and not a few bad ones) that could not stand the test of practice. Some were impractical; some generated unforeseen consequences; some couldn't enlist the support of those who matter most in education: teachers and students.

It won't do, then, simply to declare ideas essentially good or bad; the test of the value of ideas is their fruit, their consequences. We must examine what they *do* and what they *render*. We must ask: What does this idea make possible and what does it make impossible? How does it help us ameliorate or at least cope with important problems? What new problems does it generate?[4]

In Chapter 2, I explore what accountability does and renders. The picture, as I've already suggested, is not pretty. But what about engagement?

Again, because self-styled reformers at the state and federal levels have been so busy building remote-control accountability systems, we know little about what school systems built on the principle of engagement might look like. There is, however, one exception. One unlikely state, smack in the middle of the country, has developed a school improvement system—in this state, no one talks of reform; people prefer to think of all schools as engaged in school improvement—that turns traditional conceptions of accountability inside out. In doing so, it helps us to evaluate this engagement idea, to examine what it does and what it renders.

In 1998, Nebraska became the forty-eighth state in the nation to adopt state standards in core content areas. Two years later, it became the forty-ninth state to adopt a state assessment and accountability system. By this time, Nebraska had witnessed the pitfalls of systems based on state tests. It also wished to honor the state's long tradition of local control and signal its faith in its educators. And so it chose to give districts discretion about how they met state standards, including the assessments they would use to measure student learning. It designed a *statewide system of local assessments*—the School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS). Although this system includes some checks—a standardized writing assessment and occasional reporting on national standardized tests—districts for the most part use locally designed assessments to measure and report student performance. They are also responsible for documenting the quality of those assessments. The state evaluates district portfolios based on reviews of both student performance *and* the technical quality of the district's assessment process.

I describe both the story and the components of STARS in detail in Chapter 3; here it is enough to suggest that Nebraska's approach differs from what we find in other states in several important ways:

- It is a system of local assessments, not a state test.
- It requires multiple measures of student performance.
- It requires documentation of assessment quality.
- It uses classroom-based assessments for state reporting.
- It includes no high-stakes tests.

Nebraska's education commissioner, Douglas Christensen (2001a), has described STARS as "bottom up"; that is, the locus of the system is the classroom, where the most important decisions about teaching and learning take place. The principle here is that assessment must be meaningful and useful in the first instance to teachers and students. So another way to think about STARS is as an inside-out system: teachers weave assessment into teaching and learning in the classroom first and *then* share the information obtained from those activities with others.

The Nebraska Story features teachers and administrators redefining what it means to be a professional educator, schools remaking themselves into professional learning communities, and a state developing

new lenses for and conversations about the work of schools. To be sure, the plot is a complicated one: The road to school improvement and improved student learning in Nebraska has not been (nor is it now, five years into the process) smooth or painless. And it's fair to say that the still-young STARS needs time to mature. But at the end of the day, the most important plot element of the Nebraska Story is foreshadowing: put simply, STARS gives us a glimpse into the next generation of standards, assessment, and "accountability"—the first twenty-first-century approach to school improvement.

Design of the Book

Most good stories, engaging stories, are character driven. The protagonist of the Nebraska Story is *teachers*. Or better: teacher-leaders. I will judge this book to be successful if it helps teachers take a more active leadership role in their schools' efforts to support student learning. If it helps teachers lead the way toward twenty-first-century school "reform," all the better. But in the meantime, the Nebraska experience provides a range of more humble, but undoubtedly significant, lessons for teachers anywhere.

Chapter 2 describes the accountability agenda, counts its considerable costs, and begins to outline an alternative approach to school improvement: engagement.

Chapter 3 shares big-picture research on Nebraska's School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS). It provides an overview of statewide results but also some of the key cultural changes in Nebraska schools since the advent of STARS. In so doing, this chapter shows not only *that* a system based on the notion of engagement is possible, but also what it does and what it renders.

Chapters 4–6 are organized around how Nebraska educators build rich, engaged relationships with various educational partners. Each of these chapters includes both an overview of trends in Nebraska schools and at least one portrait of practice in which Nebraska educators highlight a key practice from their classroom or school. Chapter 4 demonstrates how Nebraska teachers are making assessment meaningful in their classrooms both by sharing assessment information with students and by *involving* them in assessment. Chapter 5 demonstrates how Nebraska teachers are developing new models of professional development that bring them out of what they call "private practice" in order to work together across content areas and grade levels. Chapter 6 demonstrates how Nebraska teachers are building

school-community relationships that support and sustain school improvement. Taken together, these chapters provide a kind of primer on the arts of teacher leadership. My brief conclusion offers a final call for teacher-leaders to set a new agenda for twenty-first-century public education.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Peter H. Johnston (1992) for this formulation.
2. See *Quality Counts* reports at www.edweek.org/re/articles/2004/10/15/qc-archives.html.
3. This phrase was a mainstay of then-Governor Bush's 2000 election bid. See, for instance, the transcript of his first debate with Al Gore, available at the Commission on Presidential Debates website: www.debates.org/pages/trans2000a.html.
4. My thinking here is informed by the philosophical tradition of pragmatism. According to Louis Menand (2001) in his wonderful book *The Metaphysical Club*, pragmatists understand ideas to be "provisional responses to particular and unreproducible circumstances." Therefore, "their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptability" (xii).