

Nebraska STARS: Achieving Results

Despite being pressured to adopt a statewide test — and raising eyebrows for not doing so — Nebraska continues to believe in the superiority of local assessments. And, as the authors report, that belief has been vindicated by several years' worth of data showing improved student performance.

BY PAT ROSCHEWSKI, JODY ISERNHAGEN, AND LEON DAPPEN

IN 2000, the state of Nebraska passed legislation requiring the assessment of student performance on content standards, but its requirements were very different from those of any other state. Nebraska created what has come to be known as STARS (School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System). Under STARS, each of Nebraska's nearly 500 school districts is required to develop a local assessment system to measure student performance on standards. Since this process began more than five years ago, we have learned much, and we can say with confi-

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dence that Nebraska STARS has produced positive results.

Nebraska stands alone. In the 2003 edition of *Education Week's* "Quality Counts," the state earned a grade of F — largely because it did not measure school performance by means of a mandatory statewide test, complete with rewards and sanctions. According to the report, Nebraska was "lagging behind" in accountability. Yet in most academic categories Nebraska's children rank among the top 10 in the nation, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Nebraska is not "lagging behind" at all. Instead, the state has made a conscious decision to lead the way in developing a new system of accountability that focuses on building assessment literacy among educators and enhancing student performance through the use of a high-quality, locally developed assessment system.

Nebraska's assessment system includes both summative and formative assessment — what Rick Stiggins has called "assessment of learning" and "assessment FOR learning."¹ The STARS system, by calling on local districts to develop classroom-based assessment, has created unique challenges as well as opportunities to provide leadership for learning. According to Doug Christensen, Nebraska's commissioner of education, STARS ensures that decisions about student learning are made in the classroom, "where learning occurs." This process honors teachers and relies on their professional judgment, but it also demands hard work and a great deal of leadership from all of the state's educators. Thus Nebraska educators face very specific challenges: to develop high-quality local assessment systems, to ensure that the data collected in those local assessment systems are analyzed, and to use the data for improving instructional practice in classrooms. We've been engaged in this process for some years and are ready to share our results.

WHAT DOES A HIGH-QUALITY LOCAL ASSESSMENT SYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

Nebraska educators believe a high-quality local assessment system includes curriculum aligned with standards, the opportunity to learn, and fair and accurate measurement. In the STARS process, districts first adopt local or state standards for reading, mathematics, science, and social studies in grades 4, 8, and 11. Districts then submit an assessment plan that includes norm-referenced measures and locally developed criterion-referenced measures to assess the district's standards at

the identified grade levels. Finally, each district in Nebraska compiles a portfolio of its assessment procedures along with sample assessments and submits them to the state department for review and public rating.

Nebraska STARS is unique in several ways. As described by Chris Gallagher in these pages two years ago, STARS:

- is a system of local assessments, not a state test;
- promotes a balanced approach to assessment using multiple measures;
- involves evaluation of achievement and of assessment quality;
- uses classroom-based assessments for reporting; and
- includes no high-stakes testing.²

The review of local assessment systems is handled by means of District Assessment Portfolios, which each district submits for each of the content areas. In partnership with the Buros Center for Testing, housed at the University of Nebraska, the state department contracts with assessment experts from across the nation to review and rate the portfolios on a scale ranging from unacceptable to exemplary. The evidence in the portfolios is judged against specific quality assessment criteria that were established by the state department as required by law. There are six criteria: 1) the assessment matches the standards, 2) the students have the opportunity to learn, 3) the assessment has been reviewed for bias and sensitivity, 4) the assessment is at the appropriate level, 5) the assessment is reliably scored, and 6) the mastery levels have been appropriately set. The results are made public in Nebraska's annual *State of the Schools Report*.

Nebraska teachers and administrators have found the local development and validation of an assessment system to be a significant challenge. But the experiences have resulted in powerful statewide professional development. Assessment literacy teams have been established across the state for local assessment work. As of 2002, as many as one-third of the state's 22,000 teachers had been involved in the process, according to the state department. Much has been learned, and incredible numbers of hours have been invested. In the words of one Nebraska teacher, "I have never worked so hard in my life, but I have learned so much. I am a better teacher because the assessment data make a connection directly to the way I teach. I have changed what I do in my classroom."³

But the primary question in the minds of Nebraska educators has been, "Does all of this effort improve

student learning?” Stakeholders within the state have been waiting for the answer to this question and rightly have wanted to know the results of the process. And now, after more than three years of collecting both qualitative and quantitative data, Nebraska can finally begin to answer that question. Nebraska STARS makes a positive difference in the learning of Nebraska students.

THE QUALITY OF LOCAL ASSESSMENTS

The rating of the quality of local assessments represents an opportunity for equitable curriculum alignment and fair measurement to take place in a local school district. Assessment portfolio ratings have improved since the beginning of the development process, as have the opportunities for students. Educators have been working hard to improve curriculum alignment and measurement for students in their districts. As Gallagher reported, “We revised the English curriculum. The elementary started with theirs, then the others. We took each piece we felt was important and aligned it . . . all the way across — vertically as well as horizontally.”⁴

The results of the local curriculum alignment efforts have been reported in the district assessment portfolios, and ratings have improved each year. To meet state accountability goals, districts must have earned assessment quality ratings of “Good,” “Very Good,” or “Exemplary.” According to the policy adopted by the state board of education in 2004, if a district has not earned such a rating, it has one year to raise the quality of its assessments or find itself in violation of Nebraska’s Rule 10, the accreditation rule. In 2001, 66.31% of Nebraska districts had already earned ratings of good or better. By 2005, the percentage of districts meeting the goals had risen to 97.73% in reading and 99.54% in

math. Table 1 displays the data from the first five years of district ratings. (Note that before 2004-05, testing alternated each year between reading and math.)

Partnerships have been formed that involve the Nebraska Department of Education, the regional Educational Service Units, the University of Nebraska, other higher education institutions, and the school districts within the state. Without these partnerships — which have encouraged and supported assessment literacy, provided additional assessment training and preparation, and created new assessment credentials — the locally based system of standards, assessment, and accountability could not have succeeded. With their improved assessment literacy, educators have found appropriate ways of aligning curriculum with standards and providing seamless opportunities for students to learn. Teachers have transferred this new learning to classroom practice by reviewing their assessments for fairness and accuracy. In the words of a Nebraska teacher, “I simply didn’t know what I didn’t know about curriculum and assessment. It all makes sense, but I have had to learn a lot.”⁵

HAS STUDENT LEARNING IMPROVED?

Student learning had never been reported statewide in Nebraska before 2001, so baseline data were first established in the 2000-01 school year. Since then, there has been continuous improvement in student performance on standards each year. While students were at first tested on reading and math in alternate years, beginning in 2004-05 performance was assessed on both reading and mathematics standards. Nebraskans are encouraged by the results, as more students each year meet the state’s rigorous content standards in both subjects.

TABLE 1.
Assessment Quality Ratings of Nebraska School Districts, by Year

Rating	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2004-05
	Reading	Mathematics	Reading	Mathematics	Reading	Mathematics
	Percentage Of Districts	Percentage Of Districts	Percentage Of Districts	Percentage Of Districts	Percentage Of Districts	Percentage Of Districts
Exemplary	15.64	30.21	48.97	68.24	52.26	68.79
Very Good	46.26	46.45	40.73	29.65	45.02	30.07
Good	4.41	6.64	1.14	.71	.45	.68
Needs Improvement	25.55	8.47	2.06	.71	0	.46
Unacceptable	8.15	8.24	7.09	.71	2.26	0

Mastery levels for student performance on standards in both subjects were determined in September 2001 through statewide processes of setting cut scores. The Buros Center for Testing facilitated this work. Both processes involved approximately 75 teachers from across the state who contributed their professional judgment to the modified Angoff method for the determination of mastery levels. The rating system of Nebraska STARS (Unacceptable, Needs Improvement, Good, Very Good, and Exemplary) was then applied to the cut scores determined by this statewide process.

As was the case with the district's assessment quality ratings, to meet the state's accountability goals for student performance, districts have to achieve one of three ratings: "Good," "Very Good," or "Exemplary." The rating classifications are based on the share of district students performing at specified levels and differ slightly for reading and mathematics (e.g., exemplary in reading is defined as 85% to 100% and in mathematics as 80% to 100%). Those districts that fail to reach the goals must develop and implement an improvement plan that will raise their ratings within a three-year period. If the required goals are not achieved then, the district faces the possible loss of its accreditation. Teachers and administrators report that they have been using data for improving instruction, and they have been working very hard at focusing on student achievement. STARS has created the understanding that, as one educator indicated, "it's everybody's job to improve student performance, and the only way you can improve student performance is to measure

it regularly. We take data so that we can see from year to year if we are making gains or regressing. This data drives all our curriculum changes and everything we do in the system."⁶ Table 2 displays the percentages of districts that earned one of the top-three student performance ratings in each of the past five years.

ADDITIONAL POSITIVE RESULTS

Other evidence of improved student performance comes from quantitative studies conducted by independent researchers. For example, studies conducted by two of the authors support the contention that student achievement has improved since the development of Nebraska STARS. Jody Isernhagen and Leon Dappen compared reading scores for 2001 to reading scores for 2003.⁷ They examined scores both on locally developed criterion-referenced tests and on norm-referenced tests for grades 4, 8, and 11. Data were included for all Class 3, 4, and 5 school districts, representing over 94% of the students in the state. Although there were gains between 2001 and 2003 in the average percentage of students at grades 4, 8, and 11 who demonstrated mastery on the criterion-referenced test in reading, the most significant finding is that in fourth-grade reading, more than 5% more students were rated proficient in 2003 as had been in 2001.

Although there were gains on the norm-referenced tests (except for a slight decrease in eighth grade), the most significant improvement has been in the locally developed criterion-referenced assessment. These are

TABLE 2.
Top Three Student Performance Ratings, by District

Grade Level	Rating	Reading			Mathematics		
		2000-01 Percentage Of Districts	2002-03 Percentage Of Districts	2004-05 Percentage Of Districts	2001-02 Percentage Of Districts	2003-04 Percentage Of Districts	2004-05 Percentage Of Districts
4	Exemplary	31.82	42.72	66.09	45.39	70.59	79.10
	Very Good	39.77	38.90	23.27	27.19	16.71	12.94
	Good	18.86	14.32	7.92	19.35	8.71	5.47
8	Exemplary	34.08	35.18	59.23	30.30	41.18	59.10
	Very Good	34.36	44.88	33.33	27.55	30.53	25.67
	Good	22.35	15.79	4.76	32.23	23.81	11.94
11	Exemplary	23.60	21.46	47.47	18.25	30.00	41.25
	Very Good	48.69	53.64	40.47	26.24	29.23	36.58
	Good	18.73	22.22	11.28	39.54	35.77	17.12

expected results, as norm-referenced measures are not as highly correlated with state standards as locally developed tests. In addition, the fact that the norm-referenced performance has remained relatively stable suggests that preparing for the criterion-referenced tests has not interfered with Nebraska students' generally strong performance on norm-referenced tests.

STATEWIDE WRITING ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Just as the norm-referenced tests serve as a way to "audit" the local assessment results, so does the statewide writing assessment. A statewide writing assessment was field-tested at all three grade levels in 2001. Then it was conducted in fourth grade only in 2001-02 and in eighth grade only in 2002-03. In 2004, the statewide assessment was conducted at all three grade levels. The test is scored at a scoring site within the state by teachers who have been fully trained in trait-based writing, and its results offer additional validation of local assessment results.

Although statewide data have not been collected at all grade levels in all three years, districts report that their local writing processes are alive and well. In the words of Nebraska educators, as summarized by Chris Gallagher, "We have been doing practice assessments, peer editing, writing to prompts, placing an emphasis on the five-paragraph essay, and making explicit use of 'Six Traits' in the classroom . . . all in response to writing scores and in preparation for the Statewide Writing Assessment."⁸ And the classroom emphasis on writing has led to improved student outcomes. In 2001-02, 73% of students met the statewide standards at fourth grade, and 75% met them at eighth grade. By 2004-05, 83% of students met the standards at fourth grade, 85% met them at eighth grade, and 90%, at 11th grade.

Because the results of local assessment systems have been validated by the national tests and by the statewide writing assessment results, Nebraskans can say with some confidence that the results are all moving in the same direction — up. As one Nebraska teacher put it, "We are focused on student learning. The results have become the center of our school improvement efforts."⁹

WHAT'S NEXT FOR NEBRASKA?

Teachers, principals, curriculum directors, and superintendents in Nebraska have all been heartened by the improved student achievement and the more equitable

opportunities that schools and districts have provided for students as the state's assessment system has acquired a local focus. The system is not perfect, of course. Not every school or every district is where it wants or needs to be, but the state's educators keep on working toward that goal. Each and every educator in Nebraska is aware of the state goals and is targeting improvement efforts toward meeting them. In the words of Commissioner Christensen, "This is the right thing to do. We must provide the same kind of educational opportunity for all of the state's children that we want for our own children and our grandchildren."

Nebraska's system of standards, assessment, and accountability is not without its critics, but it has gained positive national interest as well. As reported by Deborah Bandalos, "Teacher-led assessment systems appear to be both possible and effective in developing benefits such as increased assessment literacy and positive impacts on classroom instruction."¹⁰ Monty Neill of FairTest has written, "Nebraska is the state closest in approach to the Principles of Authentic Accountability. While it is a small state, nothing Nebraska has done is impossible for a large, more urban state to accomplish."¹¹

Because they believe that Nebraska's approach is the right approach to standards, assessment, and accountability, the state's educators will continue to seek results locally. Nebraskans see the value of promoting high-impact, not high-stakes, assessment. Judging from the results thus far, STARS will keep shining in Nebraska.

1. Rick Stiggins, "From Formative Assessment to Assessment FOR Learning: A Path to Success in Standards-Based Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2005, pp. 324-28.

2. Chris W. Gallagher, "Turning the Accountability Tables: Ten Progressive Lessons from One 'Backward' State," *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 2004, p. 355.

3. Pat Roschewski, "Pre-submission Portfolio Sessions," interviews with teachers, June 2004.

4. Chris Gallagher, "Charting STARS: New Conversations," University of Nebraska, August 2004.

5. Roschewski, op. cit.

6. Gallagher, "Charting STARS," p. 13.

7. Jody Isernhagen and Leon Dappen, "An Examination of 2001 and 2003 Nebraska Criterion Referenced Tests," unpublished manuscript, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, June 2004.

8. Gallagher, "Charting STARS," p. 16.

9. Roschewski, op. cit.

10. Deborah Bandalos, "Can a Teacher-Led State Assessment System Work?," *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, Summer 2004, p. 40.

11. Monty Neill, Lisa Guisbond, and Robert Schaeffer, *Failing Our Children: How "No Child Left Behind" Undermines Quality and Equity in Education*, May 2004, p. 161, www.fairtest.org. **■**

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