History and Background of Nebraska’s School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS)

Pat Roscheewski, Nebraska Department of Education

Nebraska’s approach to standards, assessment, and accountability, the School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS) is based upon local control and the belief that classrooms and teachers must be at the heart of student learning and accountability. STARS relies on locally-developed assessment systems to accurately measure and report student performance on state content standards. Each local system in Nebraska’s 500+ school districts is reviewed for technical quality, and districts are publicly rated for assessment quality and student performance. The purpose of this article is to establish the historical background.

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In the early 1990’s, Deputy Commissioner of Education in Nebraska, Doug Christensen, developed the “High Performance Learning Model.”’ This model formed a triangle including three concepts: quality learning, equity, and accountability. At the base of the triangle were schools, communities, and families. The model included teaching and learning, instructional strategies, and local planning for school improvement. The High Performance Learning Model became the philosophical basis of all educational policy in the state of Nebraska including the School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System. As Christensen transitioned to the Commissioner of Education in the mid-nineties, a new era of education renewal had begun in the state of Nebraska.

The development of Nebraska’s first academic content standards began in 1996 with the implementation of GOALS 2000 and was finalized in 1998 with the legislative adoption of Nebraska state content standards, Leading Educational Achievement through Rigorous Nebraska Standards (L.E.A.R.N.S.). The standards were developed through a process of statewide input of all stakeholders, modeling the process outlined in the High Performance Learning Model. In 1998-99 the State Board of Education turned its attention to the issue of statewide assessment and emphasized performance—based instruction, teaching, learning, best practices, and locally determined school improvement. The Nebraska School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS) was underway.

Although Nebraska’s original legislation for statewide accountability in 1998 mandated a single state test, Christensen argued successfully on behalf of a system that would allow local control of testing. In his speech to the education committee of the legislature and to the educators in Nebraska, Christensen (2000) stated that while every school within the state had room for improvement, the “Decisions about whether or not students are learning should not take place in the legislature, the governor’s office, or the department of education. They should take place in the classroom because that is where learning occurs.” The policy makers did agree to include a statewide writing assessment as part of the statewide assessment system. The writing assessment was included to serve as a political compromise between those legislators who preferred a single state test and those who were adamant about local control. Additionally, the policy makers believed the statewide writing assessment would serve as an audit of local performance results.

Policy makers in Nebraska, the 49th state to adopt a statewide assessment system, were aware of the challenges being faced in other states using single tests or high-stakes accountability models. As a result, they wanted to avoid the pitfalls caused by misuse of information from standardized tests. Nebraska’s policymakers and educators agreed with Popham (1999) who claimed standardized achievement tests should not be used as a single measurement of educational quality. Standardized tests, he indicated, although effective in differentiating between students’ scores do not match or measure state standards, often measure students’ innate abilities or background experiences, and do not serve as an effective measure to judge

Pat Roscheewski is Director of Statewide Assessment, Nebraska Department of Education, 301 Centennial Mall S, Lincoln, NE 68504; proscheew@nde.state.ne.us. Her areas of specialization are classroom assessment, building local assessment systems, and assessment policy.
how well students learn and teachers teach. Nebraska policy makers learned the difference between what Stiggins (2002) calls the "Assessment of Learning and Assessment for Learning." Policy makers in the state shaping the assessment legislation were concerned that the implementation of one summative measure as a state-wide test would have little power to change what actually happened in classrooms.

Nebraska policy makers read reports by Gough (2000) describing comments from educators in Indiana, North Carolina, and Texas who described a narrowed curriculum or the limitation of higher-order thinking skills due to high stakes testing. Nebraska educators were influenced by Vaillero (2000) who reported AERA president Lorrie Shepard's remarks as she urged educators should find ways to guard against the negative effects of externally imposed tests and to develop classroom assessment practices to help students take the next steps in learning. Because Nebraska had not yet built a statewide assessment system, it made sense to the policy makers and many educators in Nebraska to build assessments from what Christensen (2001) called "the classroom up" and to build them within the local program of curriculum and instruction. That approach, many believed, would support the primary goal of assessment: to provide the information needed to guide and improve instruction in the classroom.

Reports from the Nebraska Department of Education (2002) reflect Nebraska's consistently high rankings on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) and the American College Test (ACT), but in 1999–2000 the state still had no statewide data collection about the performance of all students within each district or building. Policy makers believed it was time for an assessment system to be developed and for that data about student performance to be collected and used. Without statewide performance data, policy makers argued, there would be no systematic way of knowing how to improve the learning for all students within the state. When the state's legislative framework for locally developed assessment system was built in 1999–2000, it was based upon a positive "renewal" approach described by Bieschowsky, Isenhagen & Gallagher (2001) as "assessment affirmation."

Throughout the 1999–2000 school year, Commissioner Christensen and the State Board of Education proposed the current School-based, Teacher-led, Assessment and Reporting System (STARS) and, along with a coalition of state educators and policy makers, was able to convince the state legislature to adopt this approach. As a result, in the spring of 2000, the Nebraska legislature passed LB#812, the state's first legislation requiring the assessment and reporting of student performance on rigorous content standards. Nebraska's statewide system of local assessment development was underway. A number of systematic checks and balances were built into the statewide system. These checks and balances provide an external "audit" to the locally developed assessment systems. The external checks include a statewide writing assessment in grades 4, 8, and 11, an annual "quality review" of local assessments by assessment experts and national measures such as NAEP, ACT and embedded norm-referenced tests.

Nebraska's system for standards, assessment, and accountability is unique. Nebraska STARS requires each of the 500+ school districts in Nebraska to identify how it will measure and report student performance on statewide content standards in reading, speaking, listening, mathematics, science, and social studies. Districts have the opportunity to develop their own local standards and submit them to the Nebraska Department of Education for approval as equal to or more rigorous than state standards. School districts may select norm-referenced tests, develop criterion-referenced assessments, or use classroom assessments to measure the state or state-approved standards. According to the Nebraska Department of Education (2002) all districts are required to administer a norm-referenced assessment at least once in the elementary grades, once in the middle school grades, and once in the high school grades, so a majority of the school districts elected to include an NRT in their reporting on standards.

The schedule for assessing reading and mathematics standards in grades 4, 8, and 11 alternates each year, beginning with reading, speaking, and listening in 2001, mathematics in 2002 and science and social studies to be included in subsequent years. Statewide writing assessment began in 2001 with the field-test assessment of grades 4, 8, and 11 in 2001. Since the passage of NCLB, this has changed. Beginning in the 2003–2004 year the statewide writing assessment became part of Nebraska's AYP formula and will be repeated annually.

The legislation providing the framework for local assessment development also requires the Nebraska Department of Education to ensure the quality of each local assessment system. With the assistance of the Eures Center for Testing at the University of Nebraska, six quality assessment criteria were developed covering content and curricular validity, fairness, and appropriateness of score interpretations. Each district must assemble an assessment portfolio that includes samples of local assessments used in each grade level assessed and information on how the assessments for each grade level were determined to meet the six quality criteria described by Plake, Impara, and Buckendahl (2004). These portfolios are submitted for review by assessment experts contracted from Nebraska and from other states. The portfolios represent the process of curriculum alignment and test development in each local school district. As reported by Plake, Impara, and Buckendahl (2004) in addition to the feedback on how well their assessments meet each of the quality criteria, districts are given an overall rating on each portfolio ranging from "Unacceptable" to "Exemplary." The ratings are reported along with district student performance levels to help inform the public about the trustworthiness of the assessments upon which these student performance results are based.

STARS represents what Jones and Ongtoogook (2002) suggest are "other possibilities" for assessment that are "multifaceted and include local performance assessments and informed teacher judgments." STARS provides accountability for reporting how well students are doing on content standards while protecting the local curriculum. Nebraska teachers have taken advantage of many professional development opportunities such as those described by Lukin, Bandalo, Eckkout, and Mickelson (2004) including learning teams, the assessment cohorts, and the STARS professional development sessions through the Educational Service Units. These opportunities for new learning have supported teachers in their ability to accurately and appropriately assessing the learning of students within their classrooms. STARS values and supports learning for both teachers and students in the classroom.
Nebraska’s approach to standards, assessment, and accountability keeps teaching and learning as its top priority. The use of assessment data in STARS is valued first and foremost for its use in classroom instruction, and the use of classroom-based assessment has been shown to produce quality results. Black and William (1998) in their studies of the effects of formative classroom data on student performance discovered very impressive results. In fact, in one study, quality formative assessment had an average effect size of 3. This significant impact on the improvement of student performance is Nebraska’s goal for its assessment system. In order to track the effectiveness of the STARS system and its impact on student learning, a three year comprehensive evaluation of the Nebraska STARS system contracted through the University of Nebraska has begun to gather both qualitative and quantitative data about results.

Although the primary purpose of Nebraska STARS is instructional, Nebraska educators are also committed to the use of quality data for the secondary purpose of accountability. In the words of Commissioner Christensen (2001), “We intend to be accountable. That is very different than to be held accountable. This is all about good schools getting even better.” All data including student performance, school district ratings for student achievement and assessment quality are publicly displayed each year in a statewide report card. State, district, and building data can be accessed and downloaded electronically in Nebraska’s State of the Schools Report released each fall through the Nebraska Department of Education’s website: http://www.nde.state.ne.us.

Nebraska’s School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS) was initiated in 2000 by the policy makers and the State Board of Education. The system has been implemented in the past four years through the hard work of Nebraska educators and their commitment to student learning. Support for Nebraska STARS has grown continually throughout the state in combination with the professional development of Nebraska educators. As reported by Lukin, Bandalos, Eckhout, and Mickelson (2004) teachers participating in opportunities for assessment literacy have described their new awareness of assessment as “part of instruction, not an add-on.” Ownership has grown for the local assessment processes throughout Nebraska schools, and local educators continue to believe their leadership is contributing to what Christensen (2000) has maintained all along is, “Doing the right things for the right reasons to obtain the right results.”

Note

1Note: The No Child Left Behind legislation (2001) has caused recent changes in the scheduling, so that by 2004–05 results will be reported on both reading and mathematics.

References


