

VI. Authentic Accountability

“Educators today are besieged by a movement that demands higher and higher scores on standardized tests. Anyone who has looked carefully at these tests knows that they are loaded with trivia—questions that most successful adults cannot answer and would indeed scorn to answer. Our children are being fed intellectual junk food, and we would do well to insist on a healthier educational diet.”

- Nel Noddings, “War, Critical Thinking, and Self-Understanding,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2004.

Based on the first two years of its implementation, the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) law must be overhauled. It should be replaced with new federal legislation that focuses on educational improvement based on rich goals and comprehensive student assessment, not on punishments in response to narrow standardized tests.

The escalating debate over NCLB appears to offer a choice between the “bad old days” of substandard schooling for too many students, or the “bad new days” of one-size-fits-all education aimed at meeting unrealistic test score targets. In truth, there is no need to choose between these poor options because better alternatives exist.

NCLB endorsed the laudable proposition that all children should have the chance to attain meaningful educational goals. The fundamental flaws in the law – its disastrous underfunding, reduction of education to preparation for narrow standardized tests, one-size-fits-all rigidity, punitive approach, and empowerment of distant bureaucracies – should not become excuses to abandon the goal of quality education for all children. The solution is not to punish, but to promote the use of methods that will improve education so as to really leave no child behind.

The current law includes some worthy elements. It allows for local assessments, including classroom-based assessments, as part of a state assessment system. It also requires multiple measures, use of improvement plans and professional development, disaggregation of data, and highly qualified teachers. Unfortunately, the positive elements are often swamped by the law’s fundamentally punitive structure. Some good elements, such as the call for measures beyond standardized test

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scores, are essentially ignored, and many of the particulars of the improvement process are poorly thought through.

Education, civil rights, parent groups and community organizations have been working with researchers to develop alternative models of accountability to guide revising the federal law. What follows owes much to those discussions, as well as to important work done in some states (particularly Nebraska and Maine), districts and many schools. Alternative models need not be invented from scratch. High-quality assessments already exist, as does research showing how their use can powerfully assist teaching and learning. Many educators and researchers have studied the problem of accountability and proposed reforms that should also inform any effort to craft revised legislation.

This chapter presents several approaches to thinking about accountability that focus on improving teaching and learning.

- First, a set of principles that should guide development and implementation of an improvement and accountability system.
- Second, a summary of the assessment and accountability model proposed for Massachusetts by the Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education (CARE), one that incorporates elements that should be included in a revised NCLB.
- Third, a discussion of Nebraska's assessment and accountability program, a concrete example of one state trying to make authentic accountability work and having some success.

The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the politics of replacing the current NCLB with a very different model.

A. Principles for Authentic Accountability

FairTest is collaborating with education, civil rights, parent and community organizations, and researchers to develop a set of principles that can guide accountability programs. The portions of the draft principles included below are intended to spur further discussion; they are not a final product nor have they been endorsed by any other organizations. They do extend beyond testing and assessment to address fundamental issues of public schooling.

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Accountable to What Ends?

The key purposes of accountability are to inform the public – to give an accounting – of the status of the school or system; to provide information that can be used to improve teaching and learning; to ensure equity within the system; to strengthen democratic participation in governing schools; and to ensure that participants in the system carry out their responsibilities well.

Clearly there is much about schools, particularly those serving low-income and minority-group children, that must be improved. Therefore, the chief goals of accountability should be improvement and equity. Because quality public schools are widely understood as foundational to democracy, accountability procedures should strengthen, not undermine, participatory democracy. All the principles should be used to help guide participants in the system to do their work responsibly and well.

We propose four broad principles for the purposes of authentic accountability:

1. *Improvement.* Schools and districts must be accountable for using a range of measures of school health to make decisions and implement procedures over time that will improve the quality of schools and learning. Good teaching is fundamental. Since a primary purpose of accountability is to make schools better, professional development – particularly time for teachers to collaborate – must be a regular part of teachers’ paid work and must be aimed at improving practice.
2. *Equity.* Education systems can and should contribute to closing the race and class achievement gaps and to overcoming the consequences of poverty and racism. Gaps must be closed on the significant academic, personal and social outcomes that society wants for its children – not only on standardized tests – and on the social and school “inputs” that powerfully shape school achievement. Schools may need to create links with social service and health agencies to provide, for example, vision or dental care. In addition, schools should gather and publicize information about unmet social needs that hinder student achievement. Children who need more should be provided with more: equity does not mean the same for all, it means that all children receive what they need to develop fully.

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3. *Democracy.* Control over and responsibility for schools must be grounded in sound principles of participatory democracy. Accountability systems, therefore, must promote the informed involvement of key actors in the education system: parents, students, educators, and members of the local community first of all. To further strengthen democracy as well as promote equity and overall achievement, government and education systems should be accountable for promoting, expanding and strengthening schooling that is integrated by race and class.
4. *Informing the public.* The public deserves accurate information about the functioning, successes and problems of public education, focusing on the various aspects of schooling that are of major concern. For example, in addition to information on achievement (which must include more than test score data), the public needs to know if schools lack basics like well-equipped and staffed libraries, art supplies and science labs, and clean bathrooms.

Accountable for What?

Accountability must be based on a shared vision and goals for education and schools, that is to say, on agreement about what schools should be and do. The larger community must participate in setting the basic goals and purposes of the educational system and evaluating how well those goals have been met. Because a shared vision may not be present, processes must be established to enable communities to come to agreement or to allow differences to co-exist. To meet this purpose, we propose the following five principles:

1. *Priorities.* The shared vision should establish priorities for the following: academic and other formal learning; students' physical and emotional well-being; schools' social environment; and how well schools prepare students to participate in our democracy, be lifelong learners, and make a good living. Assessment information used in accountability must focus on those areas deemed most important, not only on those areas that are easiest to measure with inexpensive tools, such as standardized tests, though such tools have a place in the accountability process.
2. *Resources.* Government must be held accountable for providing education systems, including schools and pre-schools, with adequate resources to meet agreed-upon priorities. This includes

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the money to hire good teachers and ensure continuing professional development. It also includes money to provide small classes, books, and technology and supplies in a comfortable, clean and hospitable environment in order to ensure that all children receive an adequate and equitable opportunity to learn. Resources for other policies and programs known to contribute to important outcomes, such as pre-school or health care, must also be provided. Schools and districts should be accountable for using their resources fairly and effectively.

3. *Student learning.* Education systems should be accountable for ensuring that all students learn those essential things society agrees all should learn (i.e., academic standards) and for enabling all students to pursue areas of individual interest and talent. Assessments of academic, vocational or other formal learning must promote, measure and provide useful feedback on conceptual understanding and the ability to use knowledge and create rather than primarily procedural, factual or surface learning. They must include all important content areas of learning and be congruent with current knowledge about how students learn. Graduation rates and post-secondary success should be included in accountability reports, broken out by key demographic groups.
4. *Student well-being.* Students are happier and achieve more in environments that are hospitable and welcoming and where students feel empowered, challenged, motivated and supported. To hold schools accountable for establishing supportive and caring learning environments for all children and for ensuring students' physical and emotional well-being, there must be evidence that illuminates these aspects of schools' environments.
5. *Inclusion.* The progress and well-being of all students must be accounted for. All accountability data should be broken out by major demographic categories. Inclusion also implies respect for the diverse experiences and cultural backgrounds of students and communities.

Accountable to Whom?

Accountability must be mutual and reciprocal. An accountability system must define appropriate expectations for participants in the system (e.g., schools, districts, the state and federal governments, as well as students and teachers).

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1. *Higher levels of government* are responsible for providing sufficient resources to ensure adequate and equitable opportunity to learn; for safeguarding civil and human rights; for monitoring local systems; for analyzing research and practice to determine what works best in what circumstances; for disseminating knowledge; for providing additional support as needed; and for intervening in localities when necessary.

States can define core areas for learning, though specific standards as well as curriculum and instruction can be left to districts and schools. State agencies should intervene when localities are unable to provide a high-quality education even when they have reasonable resources. Governments are accountable for conducting business with transparency and substantial educator, parent and community input.

2. *Local schools and districts and their communities* must be the primary authorities in the accountability process. Schools are first of all accountable to their students, their parents and the local community. Local accountability involves active participation and shared power among key actors. Schools and districts also are responsible to the general public and the state.
3. *The accountability structure* delineates roles and responsibilities of the state, districts, and schools, gathers evidence as to how well they have been carried out, and includes means to ensure change and improvement where necessary.

Accountable by what means?

The means used to implement accountability can support or undermine underlying goals and overall school quality. The trend in education policy, exemplified especially by NCLB, has been to combine narrow measures with high stakes, thereby damaging schools' capacity to meet larger goals and often undermining the quality of education.

To ensure that accountability methods support comprehensive accountability goals:

1. *Use multiple forms of evidence.* Accountability requires the use of multiple forms of qualitative and quantitative evidence from both academic and non-academic areas to assess students, schools and districts and determine how to make improvements. All students must be assessed and evaluated with a range of

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appropriate tools and methods. No important academic decision about a student, a teacher, an administrator, a school or a district should be made solely on one type of evidence, such as standardized test scores. Multiple forms of evidence may include teacher evaluations of student achievement, portfolios as evidence of student work, final projects presented to a panel of community members, etc. Scores from several standardized tests do not constitute multiple forms of evidence.

2. *Assess a set of key factors that are known to predict school and system success.* These “predictive” or “formative” indicators include in-school factors such as strong classroom assessment and professional development for teachers, and out-of-school factors such as health care, housing, nutrition, and availability of high-quality pre-school; whether educators are using information in a reasonable way to improve teaching, learning and school quality; and whether the state and federal governments are providing positive support in these areas. Practices proven to inhibit high achievement or harm school quality, such as tracking, retention and lower expectations for some groups of students, should be identified and analyzed.
3. *Use skillful feedback to improve student outcomes.* Research has demonstrated that skilled use of feedback to students (“formative assessment”) is among the most powerful tools teachers have to help students learn. For assessment to be most helpful and guide further instruction, it must be comprehensive and regular enough to provide fine-grained information about each student, and the student must understand and apply the information. Most assessment, therefore, must be classroom-based and used by well-prepared teachers. Schools and districts must ensure that all teachers become skilled at this kind of assessment. Standardized exams should supplement, not supplant or overpower, classroom assessment.
- 4) *Use interventions sparingly and carefully.* Interventions from higher levels of government must focus on providing useful assistance and include harsher measures only as a last resort. Intervention should focus on factors that can produce significant improvement, including effective professional development, active parent involvement, high-quality classroom assessment, and smaller class sizes.

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If a school or district has taken steps that plausibly will lead to desired improvement, it must be allowed time for those changes to take effect. During that time, improvement efforts must be monitored using a range of evidence to determine if implementation of reasonable changes is proceeding well and schools are able to use information to effectively adjust their improvement efforts. If a school or district is unable to improve despite assistance, then a higher level of government should intervene.

The little research that exists suggests that there is no significant evidence that sanctions such as removing the principal and key staff, privatizing school or system management, making the school a charter school, or having the state run the school or district are effective or create improvement. Such sanctions therefore should be taken as a last resort, with sufficient support and resources to increase the likelihood of success, and with careful monitoring of progress. Such strong interventions should be consistent with these principles.

B. Massachusetts CARE: Call for an Authentic Statewide Assessment System

The Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education (CARE) has proposed an alternative, authentic assessment and accountability plan for Massachusetts (the full plan is available online at <http://www.fairtest.org/care/accountability.html>). It contains many features that should be included in a revised version of NCLB. It would replace the current state reliance on one set of tests, the MCAS exams. In collaboration with the Massachusetts Teachers Association, CARE has submitted its proposal as legislation. A modified version has been developed by parent, community, civil rights and education reform organizations in Chicago, and it is called the New ERA plan.

The CARE plan is based on five key points:

1. To know how students are learning, look at the work they do and at their teachers' assignments.
2. For effective staff development and school improvement, it is essential that teachers review student work together and use that information to think about improving teaching.
3. Local schools know their students best.
4. Local communities must play the primary role in evaluating local schools.

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To know how students are learning, look at the work they do and at their teachers' assignments.

5. The state's job is not to make decisions about individuals but to ensure that schools are educating all children well and to provide the necessary resources to enable schools to do so.

The CARE plan builds on Massachusetts' *Common Core of Learning*, a brief statement of essential learning goals for all children. CARE calls for expanding the Core to define "core competencies" that are leaner than the state's long, detailed, and complicated curriculum frameworks, leaving these core competencies to be filled out by districts and schools in adopting standards and then in shaping curriculum and instruction.

The key elements of the CARE proposal are as follows:

1. **Local authentic assessments.** These will be based on the new "competencies" and a school's own goals. Each school and district will have an assessment and accountability plan — approved by the local school council, the state and the district — which explains how it will assess students, how decisions such as graduation and grade promotion will be made, how it will use information about student work to improve teaching, and how accountability information will be reported to parents, students, teachers, the community and the state. Graduation will be decided by the school, not by the state.
2. **Limited standardized testing** in literacy and numeracy only. These tests will not be used to make decisions about students but will be one source of data about individual, classroom and school performance.
3. **School quality reviews.** Every four to five years, each school will do a detailed self-study. Then an independent, expert team will conduct a several-day visit to the school, interviewing students, educators, and parents, sitting in on classes, looking at examples of student work, etc. The team will present a detailed report to help guide the school in making further progress. The teams might be organized by the Department of Education or developed by the regional accreditation association.
4. **Annual school reporting.** Each school will report on progress or lack thereof toward its goals and the state's *Common Core of Learning*, and how it is using information about teacher assignments and student work to improve the school. The report will be based on the local assessments and include standardized test results. Outcomes by race and ethnicity, gender, low-income

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status, special needs, and limited English proficiency will be included. So will other information about the school, such as attendance, promotion and dropout data; survey results (such as school climate surveys); teacher qualifications; and resource availability. Data will be reviewed by the local school council, parents and other community members, the district, and the state. When needed, the state or district can send in teams to verify the accuracy of a school's report.

In this accountability system, much more information will be available than is provided by state testing programs. No one test will determine the fate of a student or a school. The plan builds in a process of continuous improvement. The state will have sufficient information to intervene in a school or district that has adequate resources but does not perform well and does not improve.

Public participation is essential to the CARE and New ERA plans. A school's community comes together to evaluate the information and improvement plans. Teachers, administrators, parents and students can openly discuss the successes and problems and come to agreements on where improvements are needed. In some Chicago schools, the local school councils, which have a parent majority already engage in such discussions.

The CARE and New ERA plans call for intervention in schools that clearly demonstrate they are not succeeding, according to multiple measures, for significant portions of their students. The first step is an investigation, particularly through the quality review process. A review must include relevant factors that may be beyond a school's control, such as family poverty or student mobility, the resources a school has, what it does with its resources, and how it might use resources better.

If needed, the district or state should provide carefully targeted assistance. If a school still does not make progress even with assistance, stronger interventions should take place. However, too little is known about how to make such interventions succeed. Therefore, states should develop and implement the stronger actions with caution and keep very close track of what does and does not work.

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C. Nebraska

“The approach to standards, assessment and accountability in Nebraska is unlike that in any other state. Nebraska’s STARS (School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System) is not based on external mandates and compliance but relies instead on the professional judgment of teachers about whether their students are learning. Commissioner Doug Christensen has remained steadfast in his belief that ‘decisions about student learning reside in the classroom where learning occurs, not in the legislature, the governor’s office, or the department of education.’”

- Pat Roschewski, “Nebraska STARS Line Up,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2003.

Nebraska Commissioner of Education Doug Christensen emphasizes that successful accountability must be done with, not to, teachers. Under his leadership, Nebraska has developed a unique state approach that provides valuable lessons for using assessment and accountability constructively.

While Nebraska has a set of standards, it allows districts to develop their own standards, provided that the state determines the district standards are high quality. Currently, a combination of norm- and criterion-referenced assessments are required for evaluating students in grades 4, 8, and 11 in mathematics, reading/writing, science, and social studies. The norm-referenced tests (NRTs) must be selected from a state list. In addition, all students in grades 4, 8, and 11 participate in a statewide writing assessment. The NRTs and writing test, however, are not part of the state accountability system, though the results are collected and reported. Accountability is based on the districts’ criterion-referenced assessments.

Four years into operation, the Student-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS) requires school districts to develop local assessment plans that are aligned with state (or district) learning standards. The STARS plan uses multiple assessment measures, as in the CARE and New ERA plans, rather than relying on a single test. Districts can develop their own instruments (which may include classroom assessments such as observations, portfolios, and rubrics) or they may purchase them from commercial publishers. These assessments and results are used for the state assessment and accountability system. Nebraska thus has a system of local assessments.

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One reporter (Dell'Angela, 2004) observed assessment in action in one suburban Nebraska school:

At Portal Elementary in La Vista, second grader Macy Morrison can see for herself that she's making progress. She has been taking tests since school started. By the end of the year, her teacher will send the district 33 measures of Macy's progress in reading, writing and math.

During a recent visit, Macy was reading an "Arthur" book into a microphone on a computer. This test measures Macy's fluency—a rare example in which speech is actually measured for state standards—and when she's finished she knows exactly what she should do to improve.

"My expression was just right, but I'm still getting there on my smoothness because I had a lot of stops," Macy said, clicking to a bar chart of her progress during second grade.

Districts must follow six criteria in designing their assessment plans: assessments reflect state or local standards; students have an opportunity to learn the content; assessments are free from bias; the level is developmentally appropriate for students; there is consistency in scoring; and mastery levels are appropriate. The state recently issued new regulations requiring districts to ensure that their assessments meet the breadth and depth of the standards.

Local assessment portfolios are submitted to the Nebraska Department of Education for review by an independent panel that rates the portfolios' quality. If a district's assessment obtains a rating of very good or excellent, it need not resubmit the portfolio for four years (e.g., a reading assessment approved in 2003 will be resubmitted in 2007). District Assessment Portfolios that are not approved are modified and resubmitted the following year. All assessment systems, however, are expected to be regularly improved, and the state is establishing a process for providing feedback to districts.

In essence, Nebraska has created standards for local assessments, a means to evaluate them in light of the standards, and a structure for ensuring that every district's assessments improve. If each district has strong standards and a high-quality assessment program, then it is reasonable to assume that if a teacher determines a student has reached a particular learning level, that determination is correct.

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Chris Gallagher (2004), who is reviewing the STARS system, reported on its positive consequences:

Meanwhile . . . the kids in Palmer do Community Math, skillfully solving complex real-world problems they have solicited from their neighbors and parents. The kids in Cedar Bluffs do the “Platte Attack,” writing wonderful sandbar poetry and keeping science journals on the banks of the river that runs through their rural town. The kids here in Lincoln develop math portfolios, reflecting on and documenting their learning every day. The kids in Heartland build immigrant trunks and capably present their family heritage projects to a full auditorium every year.

An F [in “standards and accountability” from *Education Week’s* annual rankings] means that Nebraska continues to buck the high-stakes, test-’em-’til-they-drop mentality. It means that in Nebraska, assessment continues to be driven by instruction, rather than the other way around. It means that in Nebraska, as one teacher aptly puts it, having standards “does not make us all ‘standard.’”

The Buros Center for Testing at the University of Nebraska has assisted the state and has reviewed district assessment portfolios (Fairtest *Examiner*, 2002). Buros staff found the districts generally produced strong assessments and are willing to improve. Jim Impara of Buros reported that most districts decided not to simply develop criterion-referenced exams, but to use classroom-based assessments that could have a more positive impact on teaching and learning. This requires building district capacity to train teachers and ensure high-quality classroom instruction.

Each year, districts send to the state their students’ results on criterion-referenced assessments in the required grades, and if needed submit their assessment portfolio for (re)approval. The state is piloting an electronic portfolio for districts to use in submitting their materials. Districts are evaluated by separate panels on both elements (assessments and achievement), as can be seen on the state website. For districts in which classroom-based evidence is a key component of the assessment system, the classroom-based evidence is used by the state to determine how well districts are enabling students to meet the standards.

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State leaders such as Doug Christensen and Pat Roschewski, Director of Statewide Assessment, conclude from extensive and continuing discussions around the state that the process has enabled teachers to learn a great deal and to create systems for talking with one another within and across districts. Those conversations have been the basis for improving the assessments. Reviews, such as those conducted by Buros and by Gallagher (2004) of the University of Nebraska, find that the assessment systems are having a positive effect on teaching and learning. Christensen reports district superintendents have come to support the program because children are learning more. In its studies, the state has identified six promising practices, the first being a shared vision and goals.

Writing in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Gallagher (2004) summarized ten lessons learned from the experience of Nebraska. They include:

1. Teachers should be regarded as leaders of reform, not impediments to it.
2. Accountability systems must focus on developing capacity, not controls.
3. Accountability systems must foster commitment, not compliance.
4. Accountability systems must promote integration of school improvement and accountability efforts.
5. Accountability systems must risk complexity rather than demand simplicity.
6. Accountability systems must include *all* students.
7. Accountability systems must also leave no teacher behind.
8. Accountability systems must engage *all* stakeholders.
9. Accountability systems must keep pedagogy – teaching and learning – at the center.
10. Accountability must promote high-impact, not high-stakes, assessment.

Nonetheless, there have been problems with implementation in Nebraska, including the following:

- There is a substantial burden on teachers, the expectations for teachers are higher, and they have had to validate their assessment practices and contribute to the state assessment program. Thus, there is some resentment and resistance.
- Some districts initially made the process burdensome. Most of those districts have been able to go back and improve their earlier efforts. Roschewski noted that the effectiveness of the

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district leadership has a direct connection to the success of the assessment system and the belief in its importance. State staff members are working with districts and the leaders within districts to solve this problem and have those districts revamp their assessment systems.

- Implementation has been uneven. Gallagher's review found substantial gaps in quality. Roschewski thinks that about three-quarters of districts have coherent systems with promising practices. All but about 12 percent, or 89 districts, meet state requirements. Of those 89, some are doing acceptably well but have not known how to document it; some have useful elements in place but have not yet constructed a coherent system; and a few districts are still at square one, often because they assumed "this too shall pass" and did little. Gallagher found instances of "insufficient teacher participation in STARS across grades and curricula." In addition, he found too little engagement by parents and the community outside the school.
- Professional development takes time and resources. The state is expanding resources for practicing teachers, including summer institutes to review assessments and an 18-hour training that leads to a certificate in classroom assessment. The primary focus has been to create learning teams in schools, which, Gallagher reports, has led to a strong buy-in from teachers. By next year, all state universities will be required to include classroom assessment practices in their teacher education programs.

Nebraska leaders are enraged by NCLB: "I don't give a damn what No Child Left Behind says," Christensen said. "I think education is far too complex to be reduced to a single score. We decided we were going to take No Child Left Behind and integrate it into our plan, not the other way around. If it's bad for kids, we're not going to do it" (Dell'Angela, 2004).

Nonetheless, NCLB has had an impact on Nebraska. Roschewski reports that Nebraska has a dual assessment system, state and federal, as do many states. NCLB requires state assessments in reading and math in grades 3-8 and once in high school by the 2005-06 school year. Nebraska has informed districts that while they can use a norm-referenced test in grades 3, 5, 6, and 7, they also can expand their district assessments to incorporate those grades—which is what most are doing. Most districts have already identified local standards for those grade levels and have developed accompanying assessments for measuring

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them. The districts will not have to present the assessments for those new grades for separate state review, but will cross-reference them to the portfolios submitted for grades 4, 8 and 11. Districts that expand use of classroom assessments to report student achievement will move closer to having the whole school involved in the assessment, which is also a Nebraska goal. If districts use norm-referenced tests to provide evidence of success, however, those tests could come to have undue educational influence. And the question of NCLB sanctions looms.

As part of the state accountability system, the state has given some districts one year to improve their assessments and three years to increase the percentage of students at proficient or higher (depending upon where the district is falling short). Those who don't improve sufficiently will have their accreditation put on probationary status. The state is offering intensive help to those districts. This process, however, is distinct from the AYP process mandated by NCLB. The state will address the sanctions attached to AYP this coming year, but state leaders clearly believe NCLB is not a good fit with Nebraska's STARS program.

In sum, Nebraska is the state closest in approach to the Principles for Authentic Accountability as described in this chapter. While it is a small state, nothing Nebraska has done is impossible for a large, more urban state to accomplish. Maine is the other state that is close to Nebraska's approach; it, too, is developing a local assessment system. Maine, Rhode Island and Wyoming have established policies in which students will have to demonstrate proficiency on local assessments in order to graduate. Rhode Island specifies that multiple forms of assessment must be used by districts. If the state test is used, it cannot count for more than ten percent of a student's score.

D. Conclusion: A Political Note

The key to this approach will be to persuade policymakers that cooperating with educators and communities to steadily improve schools across a wide array of indicators is preferable to threatening teachers and schools for failure to make progress on a few indicators measured with narrow tests. It is preferable because it will lead to substantial improvement – provided adequate resources – in ways the test-and-punish approach cannot and will not.

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The key to this approach will be to persuade policymakers that cooperating with educators and communities to steadily improve schools across a wide array of indicators is preferable to threatening teachers and schools for failure to make progress on a few indicators measured with narrow tests.

This means jettisoning fixed AYP requirements and the illusions of certainty associated with numerical test scores. It does not mean ignoring low-income and minority-group children or having low expectations. It does mean believing that most schools will improve with guidance, assistance, professional development for teachers, stronger parent and community involvement, and adequate resources. It means recognizing that a climate of threats and sanctions is ultimately counterproductive. It means establishing a more flexible but still-definite willingness and capacity to intervene - states in districts, districts in schools.

Many will be skeptical that policymakers at the federal and state levels will switch from test-and-punish to assess-and-assist. Nevertheless, pursuing this goal is necessary for two reasons:

First, because the current approach is so disastrous that it must be fundamentally changed. It is important to establish as a goal a new concept and practice of “accountability.”

Second, by having a clear goal, it is easier to determine which partial steps and compromises help move toward the goal and which do not. For example, softening the rigidities of AYP will help reduce destructive forms of pressure, but by itself that will not help schools restructure themselves for making continuous progress on a rich array of learning outcomes or for using multiple measures to assess progress. Adding resources to help teachers become better at formative assessment will contribute to improved teaching, but these will be quite limited if AYP remains tied to state tests. Thus, both changes make sense, but not in isolation. They need to be part of a coherent package.

Since states are in revolt in large part over the lack of funding for NCLB, it is reasonable to ask about the costs of this new approach. Evidence suggests, for example, that additional costs to the state of Nebraska’s reform efforts have not been particularly large – but this is in part because the real cost is the work teachers do in their schools and districts. As many advocates of assessment reform pointed out in the 1990s, much of the cost of “assessment reform” reflect time for teacher professional development and time to reorganize schools and districts to better support high-quality learning by all students. If the goal really is to leave no child behind, the education system must spend the money needed for professional development and system change. This alternative accountability approach supports high quality changes and would

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not add much to the cost. Continuing on the path demanded by NCLB and many state accountability programs will have a much higher cost: many children will continue to be left behind.

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