

Perceptions of Nebraska Teachers Regarding the Transition from STARS to NeSA and  
its Perceived Influence on the Implementation of a Balanced Assessment System.

By

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The purpose of this explanatory mixed methods study was to explore the perceptions of Nebraska teachers about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA. The study explored their perceptions of the influence of the transition on implementation of a balanced assessment system. As defined by NDE, a balanced system included NeSA testing, local criterion-referenced assessments, and national norm-referenced testing. The timing of this study was concurrent with the transition from the STARS assessment system to the NeSA assessment system in Nebraska.

Parallel studies of teachers and administrators consisted of administrators and teachers in 166 public school districts within Nebraska's 3<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District. A total of 449 educators participated in the parallel studies, including 115 administrators and 334 teachers. The major findings of the study were that educators, both administrators and teachers, were generally positive about assessment and its importance in the teaching and learning process. STARS was generally seen as positive as it related to student learning and instruction. Teachers were more involved in the STARS process than were administrators. Most educators thought that NeSA was more about accountability than STARS, but that NeSA did have benefits for the education of students as well. The transition between STARS and NeSA was seen as slightly more positive by

administrators than it was by teachers. Both groups indicated that little was done to prepare for the transition between the two systems. Relative to the overarching question concerning the prevalence of a balanced assessment system, teachers and administrators see the potential value of a balanced assessment system, but have struggled with implementation.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Overview

I'm calling on our nation's governors and state education chiefs to develop standards and assessments that don't simply measure whether students can fill in a bubble on a test, but whether they possess 21st century skills like problem-solving and critical thinking and entrepreneurship and creativity. (Obama, 2009)

The economy of the United States reached unprecedented heights at the end of the 20th century and prosperity continued into the middle of this decade. The stock market climbed to new levels, businesses profited at never before-seen levels, housing values continued to rise, and business was booming. Life was good and it appeared that the sky was the limit. However, as history has proven time and again, nothing lasts forever and every peak has its valley. A burgeoning economy inevitably faces correction.

The national news continued to focus on the discussions of a struggling economy and an increasing national debt. Businesses have tightened their belts by streamlining their services, relying on their business models and weathering the storm. Weaker business with marginal businesses plans or questionable practices often cannot make the necessary adjustments and thus become shells of their former selves. While some businesses survive, others do not.

Jobs have been lost and unemployment numbers had continued to creep up. People who have worked with a company for 20 years are being asked to reduce hours or are being let go completely. Employees were asked to do more as downsizing reduces the workforce. Recent college graduates are struggling to find employment and often end up underemployed.

While the previous comments represent a simplistic view of an extremely complex economy, they also emphasize the importance of skilled employees and management to businesses and the importance of strong employment skills for individuals. Effective hiring is critical for the success of a business and is essential in difficult economic times. Businesses continuously compete to hire employees whose skills will allow them to remain viable and to improve the bottom line. No longer are businesses only competing with their neighboring businesses down the street. The global economy of the 21st Century brings competition from across the country and from outside our borders directly into our states and our cities. “In the next decade,” says U.S. Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao, “nearly two-thirds of the estimated 15.6 million net new jobs created in our country will be in occupations that require postsecondary education or considerable on-the-job training” (Chao, 2008). Where do these businesses find the skilled labor that will become team leaders and management to allow them to compete in the global market? The spotlight shines directly on the nation’s educational system.

The role of the public school has evolved since the Founding Fathers first declared that providing a free and appropriate education was the responsibility of the State. In a speech at a conference on 21st Century Skills, President Barack Obama stated,

In a 21st century world where jobs can be shipped wherever there’s an internet connection, where a child born in Dallas is now competing with a child in New Delhi, where your best job qualification is not what you do, but what you know—education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity and success, it’s a prerequisite for success. (Obama, 2009)

This is a far change from the thoughts of the Founding Fathers, who believed education’s purpose was in the teaching of basic skills and the cultivating of values that serve a democratic society. Our leaders believed that the success of the American

democracy depended upon the development of an educated citizenry. While the prevailing position throughout the world was that the general population was not intelligent enough to become economically self-sufficient, to participate in its government, or to select its leadership, the upstart Americans believed in a government of the people, for the people, and by the people. Critical in this belief was the importance of education. The colonial system of education, that included education for the affluent few who could afford tuition, room, and board at boarding schools, was replaced with a common school organized and financed by the state.

However, public education has evolved from its initial goals of teaching basic skills and educating its citizenry. Public schools have become the institution designated to address many of the nation's societal and economic issues progressively toward the 21st century. Schools were at the center of the civil rights movement and now address the transformation to a global society as our nation and our world become increasingly diverse. Public education works to ensure that our children are prepared for the challenges of the future and to keep our nation's economic position in the competitive world.

According to the Center for Public Education, "While employers still view basic skills like reading comprehension to be fundamental to success on the job, some broader competencies—such as the ability to communicate, collaborate, thinking critically, and solve problems—are considered even more valuable" (Jerald, 2009, p. 46). Every American had a stake in making sure these young people are well prepared for life in the 21st Century. Investing in public schools has helped to meet the obligation to grant every child, of every race and class, an equal chance to pursue careers and goals of their



choosing. Personal interests are served by public schools also, for today's students will determine the well being of our nation and the quality of life for all in the not-too-distant future.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), adopted and implemented in 1965, emphasized equal access to education, established higher uniform standards and began to focus on school accountability. Reauthorized in 2002 under the Bush Administration as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), educational reform has transitioned into an accountability system that focuses on evaluation of student's opportunities to learn within a process of systemic school improvement where student learning outcomes are based on multiple forms of evidence. "The 'new' accountability focuses on student performance, schools as the unit of improvement, public reporting of achievement results, continuous improvement, and consequences for schools attached to student performance" (Fuhrman, 1999, pp. 3-5).

A 2004 study by the Thomas Fordham Foundation and Accountability Works, which evaluated accountability systems in 30 states, gave states 'mediocre' marks for the extent to which accountability systems were based on solid academic standards and tests that matched individual state standards. (Cross, Rebarber, & Torres, 2004, p. 2)

Educational professionals debate which assessment methodology to utilize to adequately meet NCLB accountability standards. School districts are limited in their capacity or resources to implement a comprehensive assessment system, which engages teachers at the classroom level. This challenge, when coupled with the challenges of communicating results with the general public and the politicians pushing accountability, was overbearing for many schools. Therefore, many states have implemented a simple, single statewide test as their primary measurement used for accountability, even though

most educators believe that any decision about a student's educational level should not be based on the results of a single test, but should include other relevant and valid information.

Nebraska educational leaders elected to follow a different strategy to approach the standards, assessment, and accountability requirements of NCLB. The School-based, Teacher-led, Assessment and Reporting System (STARS) was implemented in 2000 with an underlying philosophy that, "emphasizes a partnership between the local school districts and the Nebraska Department of Education keeping decisions about student performance on standards at the local level," (Doug Christensen, Commissioner of Education, 2000). The focus of the STARS process was in training staff to gain expertise in the assessment process and to introduce a strategy for assisting students in reaching proficiency.

**Overview of Nebraska STARS.** The Nebraska STARS system was first conceived in the late 1990's and was a bottom-up model wherein each local school district developed a set of assessments in the core curricular areas of reading, math, and science. A statewide writing assessment was also included in STARS but is not addressed by this study, as the writing assessment process used in STARS was carried over to a single, statewide test called Nebraska State Accountability (NeSA.)

The Nebraska Legislature, during the 2000 session, established the requirements and procedures for this system of standards, assessment, and accountability with the passage of Legislative Bill 812, also known as the Educational Quality Accountability Act (NDE, 2000, p. 1.1). Assessments were based on Nebraska's Leading Educational Achievement through Rigorous Nebraska Standards (L.E.A.R.N.S.) for each of these core

curricular areas with the intention of providing information at the point of instruction. The philosophy was that instruction would become informed instruction, based on the information gathered about each student and his or her needs, as well as the understanding of whether or not each student was grasping key concepts as defined by the state standards. A system of accountability was built into STARS, at least in part intended to meet the requirements of the United States Department of Education, declaring that each state submit an accountability plan. Nebraska was only one of two states that chose to administer the locally developed assessments to meet the accountability requirement.

District-based assessment systems allowed districts to implement various strategies to administer the assessments ranging from point-of-instruction assessments, repeated periodically addressing individual standards, to a single test addressing multiple standards. Many districts utilized re-teaching for students below proficiency with additional follow-up assessments. Districts were given flexibility in the development of the STARS system to meet their philosophy of assessment and to keep decisions regarding curriculum and instruction at the local level as much as possible.

The flexibility within the STARS process was often difficult to understand for those who were not involved in the process. This flexibility resulted in a lack of consistency among school districts, which often led to a public perception of an inconsistent, inefficient system. Local districts reported results of their local assessments to NDE as required; however, the summative nature of the reporting sometimes led to frustration for those wanting accountability in the form of comparability between

districts, as comparability was not applicable or implemented because assessments varied among districts.

Frustration expressed by teachers, administrators, and school districts concerning the amount of time involved in the development and administration of STARS assessments, combined with the inherent inconsistencies in methodology between districts, pushed a discussion on Nebraska assessments to the legislative level. Scrutiny of public education continued to grow with NCLB and increased the pressure on Nebraska leadership to revamp its unique system of accountability. The 2007 and 2008 legislative sessions brought about dramatic changes in Nebraska policy regarding standards, assessment, and accountability, which has resulted in significant adjustments in implementation strategies at the state and local level.

**Overview of NeSA.** Legislative Bill 1157, passed by the 2008 Nebraska Legislature, required that a single statewide assessment of reading, math, and science be phased in and, by the year 2013, replace the STARS system of locally developed assessments (NDE, 2010a, p. 1). The statewide writing assessment in STARS was carried forward into NeSA (NeSA-W) and, therefore, is not addressed by this study.

The new system was named Nebraska State Accountability or NeSA. The NeSA system would use a multiple-choice question format and would be delivered, to the extent possible, in an on-line format to all schools. Statewide criterion-referenced assessment instruments were to be developed for use in the areas of reading, mathematics, and science. Revision of state content standards served as the starting point of NeSA implementation as required per the legislation. According to the Nebraska Department of Education's first update of Standards, Assessment, and Accountability, "A local system

designed to inform the classroom teacher and to guide instruction was to be phased out in an effort to produce data that could be used in comparative accountability” (NDE, 2008, p. 9). NDE recommended that, “Each district will need to find that appropriate balance of various assessment tools, those designed for informing instruction and those designed for summative accountability” (NDE, 2008, p. 9).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Nebraska schools are in the third year of transitioning from the locally developed, criterion-referenced assessment process called Student-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS) to a single, statewide assessment called Nebraska State Accountability (NeSA).

Because the purpose of the new state-generated tests is that of comparative accountability, districts are faced with decisions of how to balance the assessment tools: local assessment for instructional information, state tests for state comparison, and national tests for a national benchmark perspective. (NDE, 2009, p. 2)

Achievement of an effective balance of the various tools, all of which have a different purpose, becomes a philosophical decision, varying by district.

The importance of a balanced assessment system is addressed further in Volume 4 of the Nebraska Department of Education’s Standards, Assessment and Accountability Update. It stated, “Nebraska’s focus must remain on student learning as the state adds new testing tools” (NDE, 2009, p. 25). The statewide NeSA tests were designed to be summative snapshots administered under standardized conditions for a different purpose than locally developed and implemented assessments. “Local classroom-based assessment, used in a formative manner, will be needed to provide the instructional information important to the continuous improvement process” (NDE, 2009, p. 25).

A system that is in balance will ensure that the right kind of assessment is used for the right purpose, and that assessment will be used to continually improve student learning. Through the use of high-quality assessment OF and FOR learning, linked to the targets of instruction, all students will be able to show what they know and can do. (Chappuis, Stiggins, Arter, & Chappuis, 2005, p. 270)

For purposes of this study, a balanced assessment system will be defined as a system of assessment and testing that includes local criterion-referenced assessments for instructional information, statewide NeSA assessments for state comparison, and national norm-referenced testing used for a national benchmark perspective. When considering the full range of assessment and testing possibilities, these three types of information can be triangulated for analysis, ultimately guiding school districts to tailor instruction to meet the needs of the students, and also used by the districts to chart their progress towards improving student growth. “Because decision makers at different levels have such diverse information needs, no single assessment can meet all their needs” (Chappuis et al., 2005, p. 58). A balanced assessment system utilizing local criterion-referenced assessments, statewide NeSA assessments, and national norm-referenced assessments, can be used for comparability as the NeSA system is implemented. This will meet the goals of the Nebraska Legislature and NDE.

Educators have inherently different perspectives on the need for a balanced assessment system and for assessments in general. Some districts and individuals may perceive assessments as only an unnecessary requirement and attempt to minimize their intrusion into the instructional process. Others may perceive assessments as a tool providing an opportunity to improve instruction and increase learning. The perceived value of the various components of a balanced assessment system is critical in determining how each piece contributes to creating a school culture conducive to the

effective use of achievement data. Therefore, this study will examine the transition period from STARS to NeSA through the perceptions of educators working within Nebraska schools.

### **Parallel Study**

This study focused upon exploring perceptions of Nebraska teachers and was conducted in conjunction with a parallel study of Nebraska administrators' perceptions completed by Michael Teahon. A comparison between the two groups of educators is provided in the final chapter to expand the breadth of the information.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this explanatory mixed-methods study was to explore the perceptions of Nebraska teachers in the 3<sup>rd</sup> congressional district, about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA and their perceptions of the influence of that shift on implementing a balanced assessment system.

### **PHASE I—Quantitative Research Questions**

1. Do teachers' perceptions differ on the value of assessment and its impact on student learning?
2. Do teachers' perceptions differ on their personal engagement in the locally developed, classroom based, criterion-referenced assessment system within STARS compared to their engagement in standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced testing within the NeSA system?
3. Do teachers' perceptions differ on their district's utilization of locally developed, classroom-based, criterion-referenced assessments within the

STARS system compared to the standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced testing within the NeSA system?

4. Do teachers' perceptions differ on their district's transition from the locally developed, classroom-based, criterion-referenced assessments within the STARS system, compared to the standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced test within the NeSA system?
5. Do teachers' perceptions differ on the prevalence of a balanced assessment system within their school district?

### **PHASE II—Qualitative Research Questions**

**Overarching question.** How do teachers describe their district's balanced assessment system, including local criterion-referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm-referenced tests?

#### **Sub-questions.**

1. What is the purpose or purposes of assessment in Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District?
2. What is the impact of STARS upon instruction and student learning in Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District?
3. What is the impact of NeSA upon instruction and student learning in Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District?

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This study was a mixed methods study using an explanatory mixed-methods approach. In Phase I, quantitative data using a survey of teachers' perceptions about assessments in general, the Nebraska STARS assessment system, the NeSA assessment



system, the transition from STARS to NeSA, and the prevalence of a balanced assessment system were collected. In Phase II, the collection of quantitative data was followed with the collection of qualitative data for the purpose of assisting in the explanation and interpretation of the findings. The addition of the qualitative data allowed for further examination of unexplained or surprising results (Creswell, 2002, p. 215).

The explanatory mixed-methods approach was chosen because it allows both quantitative and qualitative data collection in a sequential and comparative way. The timing of this study was concurrent with the transition from the STARS assessment system to the NeSA assessment system in Nebraska, so the flexibility allowed by this approach allowed participants to explain their experiences within each Nebraska assessment system and within the balanced assessment system recommended by NDE.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Accountability*—The process of gathering information about student achievement from both the large-scale assessment tests (NeSA) and classroom-level assessments (STARS) to make instructionally relevant decisions.

*Administrators*—Personnel in school districts working as superintendents, principals, directors of federal programs, and curriculum coordinators.

*Balanced Assessment*—A system of assessment and testing that includes local-criterion-referenced assessments for instructional information, statewide NeSA assessments for state comparison, and national norm-referenced testing used for a national benchmark perspective.

*Criterion-Referenced Tests*—Assessments wherein each student’s score is compared to a predetermined level of performance.

*Educational Service Units (ESUs)*—Public agencies (17) that support school districts at a regional level within the State of Nebraska.

*Nebraska Department of Education (NDE)*—The Nebraska regulatory agency for public education located in Lincoln, Nebraska.

*Nebraska State Accountability (NeSA)*—A statewide assessment of Nebraska academic content standards for reading, mathematics, and science implemented in 2008; it includes a statewide criterion-referenced writing assessment (NeSA-W), which was carried over from STARS.

*NeSA-M*—A statewide assessment of Nebraska academic content standards for mathematics piloted in 2009 and implemented in 2010 for Nebraska students in grades 3 through 8 and 11th grade.

*NeSA-R*—A statewide assessment of Nebraska academic content standards for reading piloted in 2008 and implemented in 2009 for Nebraska students in grades 3 through 8 and 11th grade.

*NeSA-S*—A statewide assessment of Nebraska academic content standards for science piloted in 2011 and scheduled to be implemented in 2012 for Nebraska students in grades 5, 8, and 11.

*NeSA-W*—A statewide writing assessment in grades 4, 8, and 11 which was carried over from the STARS statewide writing assessment. The writing assessment is not addressed by this study as the process used in STARS has been carried over to NeSA.

*No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*—Federal legislation enacted for the purpose of closing the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice so that no child is left behind.

*Norm-Referenced Tests*—An assessment of performance in relation to a norm group of students who took the test under the same conditions. National assessment instruments recommended by NDE include Terra Nova, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, Stanford Achievement Test, Northwest Evaluation Assessment and the ACT Plan Test (10<sup>th</sup> grade only).

*School Based Teacher Led Assessment (STARS)*—School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System. A locally developed assessment system in Nebraska, intended to measure academic content standards in reading, mathematics, and science. STARS was utilized from 2001—2008 and was being phased out through 2013. Included a criterion-referenced statewide authentic writing assessment, which was carried over into NeSA (NeSA-W).

*Standardized Assessment*—An assessment administered and scored in a predetermined, consistent, or “standard” manner.

*Statewide Assessment System*—comprehensive assessment systems that provide accurate and valid information for holding districts and schools accountable for student performance against state standards. The Nebraska system is NeSA.

*Teachers*—Personnel in school districts working in core areas of reading/language arts, mathematics, and science in grades 3 through 8 and 11.

**Delimitations**

Nebraska educators, as a whole, have experienced change in accountability expectations and requirements over the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The STARS system was implemented in 2001 and was recognized as the Nebraska system for assessment and accountability until 2008 when the Nebraska Legislature approved the NeSA system. The STARS system utilized locally developed criterion-referenced assessments for the purpose of instructional information. The NeSA system was intended to provide a common, comparability-based system of assessment for accountability reporting as a partial result of national attention to accountability and reporting, promoted by the ESEA and NCLB requirements at the Federal level. Nebraska had been resistant to the ‘one-test’ approach to assessment and reporting, being one of two states that resisted this approach during the implementation of NCLB. However, with the addition of the statewide NeSA tests as part of a transition to a balanced assessment system, the Nebraska assessment system was aligned more closely with assessment practices in states throughout the nation. This study recognizes the common experiences in the transition from a system relying on local administration of multiple locally developed assessments, which were then reported to the state, to a system relying on a single standardized test administered at the state level.

**Limitations**

A primary limitation for the study will involve the district’s overall philosophy on assessment and the use of assessment data as it relates to instructional purposes. The leadership of a school system, the subsequent resources that are put into assessment development, and the expectations for use of data likely influence the path the district

takes when approaching assessment. As districts have experienced change in leadership, a subsequent change in philosophies of assessment may also be an influencing factor.

The experience levels of Nebraska educators vary by individual, and therefore their experiences with the two assessment systems also vary. Ideally, only educators with recent experience in Nebraska schools participating in both STARS and NeSA piloting and testing would have been used for this study for a more controlled comparison of the two systems. However, because of the relative newness of NeSA and the elimination of STARS, these criteria would have severely limited the number of potential respondents. This study included teachers from various grade levels and subject areas as recommended by their administrators.

Administrators and teachers involved in the parallel studies reflected upon a decade of working within the STARS system, while they were still transitioning to the NeSA system, which was incrementally implemented in 2008-2009, 2009-2010, and 2010-2011. Because of the recent implementation of NeSA, there is limited longitudinal data from the NeSA system, which in turn limits the ability for comparing and contrasting the two assessment systems for the purpose of determining the more effective system.

### **Significance of the Study**

Several studies have added to the body of research regarding the STARS system utilized in Nebraska and its perceived impact on student learning. Since the implementation of STARS, the Nebraska Department of Education has developed a comprehensive report that details the progress towards a balanced assessment system in

Nebraska. These reports have specific information about educator perceptions first through STARS implementation and later through the transition to the NeSA system.

The significance of this study is in its examination of Nebraska's transition from the STARS system to a balanced system of assessment and testing that includes local criterion-referenced assessments for instructional information, statewide NeSA assessments for state comparison, and national norm-referenced tests used for a national benchmark perspective.

Additional significance relates to the increased level of accountability placed upon schools through NCLB and legislation passed in the Nebraska Legislature requiring the movement to the NeSA system. Concerns about the reliability of the STARS system have been expressed at the Federal level and within the Nebraska populace. The study provides a clear picture of the perceptions of the practitioners charged with the task of implementing a system of accountability while meeting its primary responsibility of increasing student learning.

### **Summary**

Over approximately the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Nebraska educators, who, for the purposes of the parallel studies were defined as superintendents, principals, and teachers, have experienced the development and implementation of two differing assessment systems. The STARS system, implemented in 2001 as a result of legislation, was the first standards-based assessment system that Nebraska had supported and required of schools in the state. Prior to that time, the only assessment requirement of Nebraska schools was that districts provide standardized testing of students as outlined in the NDE Regulation Rule 10, which provided guidelines for accreditation purposes.

In early 2008, the Nebraska Legislature passed legislation that required a single statewide criterion-referenced test of Nebraska standards in reading, mathematics and science in K-12 public schools across the state. Statewide writing was carried over from STARS and was not examined in this study. The format of the NeSA assessment was a multiple choice, one-time test, given within a testing window across the state. The results from this criterion-referenced test were compiled by the Nebraska Department of Education and reported to the public using the Nebraska State of the Schools Report. Educator involvement in test development has been minimized, compared to the STARS process, as a result of the design and development expectations of the NeSA tests. This explanatory mixed-methods study intended to explore the perceptions of Nebraska administrators about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA and their perceptions of the influence on that shift on implementing a balanced assessment system.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of the Literature**

The review of literature includes a combination of current literature, reports, and other artifacts pertinent to the area of assessment and how the testing and assessment process has changed over the course of time. The purpose of this explanatory mixed-method study was to explore the perceptions of Nebraska educators about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA and their perceptions of the influence of that shift on implementing a balanced assessment system. This chapter includes discussion of various types of tests, changing expectations for accountability and reporting, and the history and transition of statewide assessment in Nebraska as it transitions from the Nebraska STARS system, a local district criterion-referenced assessment system, to NeSA, a statewide criterion-referenced system.

### **History of Assessment and Testing**

Cultures and knowledge became increasingly interconnected within the global economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Education was expected to meet the changing needs of many types of students in multiple settings. “Knowledge is the driver in the global economy and, ultimately, educational institutions must ensure that students have the skills needed to succeed” (Kucey & Parsons, 2010, p. 2). However, historically and ideologically, seemingly little has changed. John Dewey (1859-1952), a 19th century philosopher and educational leader, promoted the idea that children should come to school and be engaged in experiences that foster their ability to contribute to society (Outdoor Education Research & Evaluation, n.d.). Horace Mann (1796-1859), another well-known proponent of education, promoted the availability of public education to an



increasingly diverse population, recognizing its value in a democratic society (Ritchie, n.d.).

### **The National Perspective on Education and Accountability**

Issues of education such as funding, quality of education, delivery methods, and impact on society, have remained consistent over the past 75 years.

Federal participation in education has been increasing. It seems likely to continue to increase because social and economic changes are placing increased demands upon education, demands which for many states become financially onerous. Some financial aid to equalize educational opportunities between states seems to be imperative. (American Education Research Association, 1941, p. 15)

While the expectations of education have seemingly remained unchanged, the methods for determining the effectiveness of education have changed. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1964 was the first federal legislation that played a formidable role in the structure of accountability for education across the nation. As part of United States President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty," ESEA emphasized equal access to education and services for all factions of society, thus recognizing the challenges of a growing portion of the nation who were living in poverty. The movement to address poverty at the national level set in motion legislation that would lead to the creation of programs such as Head Start, food stamps, Medicare, and Medicaid (Siegel, 2004).

The ESEA has been periodically reauthorized since its initial implementation in 1964 and has continued to authorize federally funded education programs that are administered by the states. Congress amended ESEA in 2002 reauthorizing it as "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB). States were required to test students in reading and math in

grades 3–8 and once in high school under the reauthorization. All students were to meet or exceed state standards in reading and math by 2014.

The purpose of NCLB being to narrow and eventually close student achievement gaps among all demographic groups by providing all children with a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education. The U.S.

Department of Education emphasizes four pillars within the bill:

- **Accountability:** to ensure those students who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency.
- **Flexibility:** Allows school districts flexibility in how they use federal education funds to improve student achievement.
- **Research-based education:** Emphasizes educational programs and practices that have been proven effective through scientific research.
- **Parent options:** Increases the choices available to the parents of students attending Title I schools. (Office of Superintendent, n.d.)

NCLB required each state to establish academic standards in core curricular areas and a state testing system that met federal requirements. The accountability requirement, Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), was designed to serve as the measure by which schools, districts, and states were held accountable for student performance under Title I of NCLB. AYP was first introduced into federal law in the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 (IASA).

According to the law, states have the flexibility to define this yearly progress, but it must include the following elements:

- State tests must be the primary factor in the state’s measure of AYP, but the use of at least one other academic indicator of school performance is required, and additional indicators are permitted;
- For secondary schools, the other academic indicator must be the high school graduation rate;
- States must set a baseline for measuring students’ performance toward the goal of 100 percent proficiency by the spring of 2014. The baseline is based on data from the 2001-02 school year;
- States must also create benchmarks for how students will progress each year to meet the goal of 100 percent proficiency by the spring of 2014;
- A state’s AYP must include separate measures for both reading/language arts and math. In addition, the measures must apply not only to students on average, but also to students in four “subgroups”: economically

- disadvantaged students, students from major racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency;
- To meet AYP, at least 95 percent of students in each of the four subgroups, as well as 95 percent of students in a school as a whole, must take the state tests, and each subgroup of students must meet or exceed the measurable annual objectives set by the state for each year. (Adequate Yearly Progress, 2004).

AYP results, based on state-determined AYP standards, were to be compared to prior years to determine if the school has made adequate progress towards the proficiency goal. The next reauthorization of NCLB, which formally expired on Sept. 30, 2007, was expected to happen in 2011 but has yet to occur in March, 2012.

While education had seen some improvement within the ten years of NCLB, there remained areas within the law that need to be addressed. Some believed that the unrealistic requirements of NCLB caused states to lower proficiency standards. In addition, NCLB was overly prescriptive and does not allow states flexibility to meet their unique needs (Duncan, 2012). Although the process for reauthorization has begun, relief is needed right away. President Obama has offered states flexibility in developing accountability systems in exchange for developing comprehensive plans to raise standards and improve teacher and principal evaluation and support (Duncan, 2012).

**The Nebraska Accountability Perspective.** In the initial years of NCLB, states were allowed to use results from either statewide assessments, a combination of state and local assessments, or local assessments for accountability purposes. Nebraska developed and used a statewide criterion-referenced writing assessment during the initial phases of NCLB for required reporting purposes. The Nebraska statewide writing assessment was not examined as part of this study.

Statewide accountability plans in Nebraska, Maine, and Iowa were based on locally selected and/or locally developed assessments. These were the only statewide plans relying on data from the local assessments that were approved for accountability purposes (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2003, p. 10).

School districts in Nebraska were required to use the School-based Teacher-led Assessments and Reporting System (STARS), NDE Rule 10, and norm-referenced tests to address the academic content standards for accountability purposes. The state identified four achievement levels for students performance on the locally developed assessments used as the Nebraska accountability plan. These levels were set as beginning, progressing, proficient, and advanced. School districts determined cut scores for each achievement level using established criteria under Nebraska's Quality Indicators.

Quality Criteria for locally developed assessments were developed by NDE with assistance from the Buros Institute for Assessment Consultation and Outreach at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. A checklist was developed that described the evidence used to meet the six criteria (NDE, 2000, p. 4.1). An assessment portfolio based on the six quality criteria was prepared and submitted to NDE by each school district. A panel of experts initially reviewed the portfolio (CCSSO, 2003, p. 10). In the later years of the STARS assessment system, these assessment portfolios were reviewed through a peer review process that involved specifically trained Nebraska educators visiting each school district to gather data and review the processes in place.

Nebraska has developed a portfolio that helps ensure that local assessments meet the technical standards required by the NCLB mandate. In this process, teachers and administrators are involved in collecting evidence to demonstrate that the procedures used to develop, score, and set performance for their assessments are of high technical quality. (Lane, 2006, p. 3)

Norm-referenced achievement tests were analyzed for reporting of student achievement relating to STARS and NCLB requirements. The Nebraska Department of Education (NDE), working with the Buros Institute, analyzed standardized tests for alignment with state standards in the curricular areas of math, science, social studies, and reading/writing. Tests reviewed included California Achievement Test (CAT); Terra Nova, a component of the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS); Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS); Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT); and Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) (NDE, 2000, Section 7). Proficiency was met for students who scored at, or above, the 50th percentile on these norm-referenced tests. Norm-referenced tests (NRTs) compare an individual's score against the scores of a group of people who have taken the same test (norm group.) Data from NRTs, when displayed graphically, take the shape of a bell curve, which is often referred to as the normal curve. The scores for average students will be near the 50th percentile (FairTest, n.d.) and at the center of the curve. Nebraska's Rule 10 had previously required school districts to administer norm-referenced tests prior to the implementation of statewide criterion-referenced writing assessment or the STARS system. Norm-referenced testing will not be examined as part of this study.

### **Development of the Nebraska STARS System**

Nebraska initially chose an atypical path to meet the reporting and accountability requirements of NCLB. Nebraska's STARS assessments were a form of criterion-referenced tests (CRTs) intended to measure how well an individual had learned a specific body of knowledge. These assessments were based on approved or adopted content standards that described what students should know and be able to do in different

subjects at various grade levels. Nebraska's performance indicators defined how much of the content standards students should know to reach the beginning, progressing, proficient, or advanced levels in the subject area for assessment and reporting purposes

**STARS Professional Development.** The Nebraska STARS system assigned responsibility for assessment development to individual school districts. Nebraska schools were supported in assessment development by NDE and Educational Service Units, which led to increasing professional development for educators relating to assessment literacy and data interpretation. Fairtest, a school reform organization, identified Nebraska as the only state practicing authentic accountability (Gallagher, 2004, p. 5). The STARS process emphasized “the most important decisions about teaching and learning happen in classrooms” (Gallagher & Ratzlaff, 2008, p. 50) and was based on the premise that assessment is for the purpose of information to guide instruction.

Perhaps more importantly, the conversations in Nebraska districts have changed over the three years of our study. We mean this in two ways. First, the language used by Nebraska educators has changed. We have witnessed enormous growth in assessment literacy, especially among teachers, many of whom now comfortably “talk assessment.” Second, the question that many Nebraska educators ask about STARS has moved from “Why do we have to do this?” to “Can it work?” to “How can we make it work for everyone?” (Gallagher, 2004, p. 9)

Professional development within Nebraska involved educators working in teams locally and regionally in developing and revising assessments to improve the instruction.

In addition, the NDE has kept its focus on professional development for educators, which we believe is the linchpin of the entire STARS system. Efforts in this direction include:

- Continued assessment literacy focus (NDE workshops, Rick Stiggins visits, partnering with ESUs)
- Further alignment work with higher education, including the development of a higher education framework for all 17 institutions for pre-service skills in assessment. (Gallagher, 2004, p. 50)

An important piece of professional development within STARS involved training educators to interpret assessment data so that information could be used to improve instruction. Many schools had little or no meaningful data relating to instruction early in the STARS process. However, with STARS, a tremendous amount of data was generated regarding student achievement. Educators, with the support of NDE and ESUs, increased their knowledge of effective assessment, “Teachers have become smarter about collecting, interpreting, and using data. These data then feed school improvement” (Gallagher & Ratzlaff, 2008, p. 52). Collecting and interpreting data became the basis for meaningful school improvement efforts as teachers evolved into leadership roles in school improvement efforts. The teachers’ role in school improvement and accountability has evolved as they developed a better working knowledge of assessment and data,

Nebraska teacher leaders . . . exert their leadership in less formal ways . . . convincing colleagues to try student-led parent conferences, serving on a school improvement task force, taking a turn facilitating a learning team, or just letting their voice be heard. (Gallagher & Ratzlaff, 2008, p. 52)

Assessment literacy, understanding data, and a setting where educators work as a team, combined with accountability expectations relating to NCLB, provided a path for Nebraska educators to move towards and expect meaningful instruction.

The Nebraska STARS system of local assessment met accountability expectations at the national level through the involvement of each local school district. Local districts aligned their assessments to the six quality criteria developed by the Nebraska Department of Education. The six criteria developed were as follow:

1. The assessments match the standards.
2. Students have an opportunity to learn.

3. The assessments are free of bias and sensitive situations.
4. The assessment levels are at the appropriate level.
5. There is consistency in scoring.
6. The mastery levels are appropriately set.

**Summary of STARS.** Nebraska Legislative Bill 812, passed in 2000, amended state statute and established requirements and procedures for the implementation of state standards, assessment, and accountability reporting. STARS required each Nebraska school district to adopt academic content standards in the areas of reading, writing, mathematics, science, social studies, and history by July 2003. A report card published by the NDE was established in the fall of 2000 as required by Nebraska statute. The report card included statewide aggregate information regarding student achievement, graduation rates, student attendance, teacher attendance, teacher qualifications, graduate follow-up information and school funding. These reporting efforts provided evidence of Nebraska's compliance with NCLB accountability and reporting requirements (NDE, 2006, pp. 1-2).

Nebraska schools began working with the NDE and ESUs in assessment development and scoring procedures for these authentic assessments (NDE, 2006, p. 1). Educational Service Units were instrumental in providing the staff development necessary to guide Nebraska educators in their efforts to become assessment literate. This literacy served to improve instructional delivery based on actual student learning. Local school districts, often in consortium settings with other schools similar in location or demographics, spent considerable resources developing a highly trained staff, working



toward assessment literacy based on student needs as determined by standards based assessment.

This first standards-based assessment system was created as a locally developed system in reading, mathematics, and science that was intended to provide guidance and support for Nebraska educators. STARS data were collected from all districts and reported to the public through the Nebraska State of the Schools Report. It was, however, almost impossible to compare between districts because of the variations in assessments from district to district. The inability to compare districts using STARS eventually led to further legislation and a change in the direction of assessment strategies within the state.

### **Overview of Nebraska State Accountability (NeSA)**

The 2007 and 2008 legislative sessions brought about dramatic changes in Nebraska policy regarding standards, assessment, and accountability. Legislative Bill 653, passed in May of 2007, called for the revision of state standards in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies and also required the development of statewide criterion-referenced test in reading and math. This began the shift from the local assessment process to the state level (Roschewski, 2008, p. 6).

Legislative Bill 1157, passed by the 2008 Nebraska Legislature, required that a single statewide assessment of writing, reading, mathematics, and science be phased in by the year 2013, replacing the STARS system of locally developed assessments (NDE, 2010a, p. 1). Nebraska State Accountability (NeSA) would use a multiple-choice question format and would be delivered, to the extent possible, in an on-line format to all schools. Statewide criterion-referenced assessment instruments were to be developed for use in the areas of reading, mathematics, and science. The STARS system that was

designed “to develop high quality local assessment system, to ensure that the data collected in those local assessment systems were analyzed, and to use the data for improving instructional practice in classrooms” (Roschewski, Isernhagen, & Dappen, 2006, p. 434) gave way to NeSA, a single statewide criterion-referenced assessment in each of four curricular areas.

LB 1157 (2008) required the implementation of the newly revised standards and statewide tests in reading, mathematics and science. Federal accountability reporting requirements were met using a combination of the previously approved STARS system and NeSA tests as they were incrementally implemented through 2013 (Roschewski, 2008).

NeSA-R (Nebraska State Accountability Reading) was the initial state level criterion-referenced test developed as mandated by LB 1157. The process began with focus on reading vocabulary and reading comprehension. A test blueprint was developed and approved by the NDE and the Nebraska State Board of Education respectively. Once approval was in place, item development began with securing reading passages from vendors. A team of reading specialists, under the direction of the NDE test development team, screened and edited for:

- interest and accuracy of information in a passage to a particular grade level;
- grade-level appropriateness of passage topic and vocabulary;
- rich passage content to support the development of high-quality test questions;
- bias, sensitivity, and fairness issues; and
- readability considerations and concerns. (NDE, 2010a, p. 4)

Test items were written and reviewed by Nebraska educators who had received extensive training in developing

universally designed assessments that allow for participation of the widest possible range of students and result in valid references about performance of all students who participate and are based on the premise that each child in schools is a part of the population to be tested, and that testing results should not be affected by disability, gender, race, or English language ability. (Thompson, Johnstone, & Thurlow, 2002, as cited in NDE, 2010a, p. 7)

“The NDE test development team and Nebraska item writers have been fully trained in the elements of universal design as it relates to developing large scale statewide assessments” (NDE, 2010a, p. 7). NeSA-M (Nebraska State Accountability Math) tests were developed using essentially the same process as that used for development of NeSA-R and were piloted as an electronic version in the spring of 2010, being fully implemented in the spring of 2011.

LB 1157 added a governor-appointed Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) with three nationally recognized experts in educational assessment, one Nebraska administrator, and one Nebraska teacher. The purpose of the TAC was to review the development plan for NeSA, and provide technical advice, guidance, and research to help the NDE make informed decisions regarding standards, assessment, and accountability. The existing Statewide Assessment Advisory Group has continued to provide input into the direction and design of the assessment system from a local perspective (NDE, 2010a, p. 2).

**Professional Development NeSA.** Professional development opportunities for educators in Nebraska were available as part of item writing, development, and review phase of the test development in each of the curricular areas identified in LB 1157. Item writers were trained in the universal design process, working in conjunction with the NDE test development team.

The first operational administration of NeSA-R was completed in the spring of 2010, and was given in both paper-pencil format and an online format. The assessment included passages and related field-tested items in the spring of 2009. The reading assessment for each grade consisted of 45 items for grades 3 and 4, 48 items for grades 5, 6 and 7, and 50 items for grades 8 and 11. The items were presented in a random order (NDE, 2010a, pp. 16, 22). Results of the NeSA-R were reported to the public and were included on the Nebraska State of the Schools Report in the fall of 2010.

Results of the NeSA-R were reviewed at the state level for reliability, validity, calibration, and equity. Comparison of results of the paper-pencil testing format of paper-and the online format were completed by the NDE and reported in the *2010 Nebraska State Accountability (NeSA) Paper and Pencil versus Computer Administered Assessment Comparability Study for Reading prepared by Computerized Assessments and Learning* (NDE, 2010b). This comparison revealed that 92.2% of the total 334 scoreable items on the NeSA Reading 2010 test showed no effect relating to the mode of delivery. The remaining 7.8% or 26 test items required further review as computer-based examinees responded differently than paper pencil examinees (NDE, 2010b, p. 9).

The field test version of NeSA-M was available to school districts in an online version in 2010 (NDE, 2010a, p. 17). Operational NeSA-M was completed in the spring of 2011.

Assessment policy in Nebraska has continued to evolve. The Nebraska State Board of Education approved the Nebraska Performance Accountability System (NePAS) in the fall of 2011. NePAS is in developmental stages and is planned to grow into an accountability system using multiple measures including NeSA scores in reading, math,

science, and writing, participation rates, graduation rates, and growth and improvement rates over the next two years (Breed, 2011, p. 6).

### **Transition from STARS to NeSA**

The transition from the STARS assessment system to NeSA system has continued to evolve. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of Nebraska educators about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA and their perceptions of that transition on implementing a balanced assessment system. A transition implies that those educators have or will be experiencing change as they and their districts make the move to the NeSA system and its new requirements of reporting and accountability compared to STARS. How change happens in educational settings has been a topic of interest for decades and has been examined from different perspectives. The Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) theory of change recognizes the implications of change for those who implement the change as well as those who are affected by the change. McREL's theory of change has two parts, first order change and second order change. The difference between first and second order change are described as follow:

- extension of past practice versus a break with past practice,
- consistent versus inconsistent with prevailing organizational norms,
- congruent versus incongruent personal values, and
- implemented with existing knowledge and skills versus requiring new knowledge and skills.

To briefly summarize, first order change can occur without new skills, and second order change requires new knowledge or skills that are not easily learned (McREL, 2005a,

pp. 3, 42). When describing first and second order change, Marzano says, “Some innovations require changes that are gradual and subtle; others require change that are drastic and dramatic. For the purposes of this discussion, we refer to these categories of change as first-order and second-order change, respectively” (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p. 66). First order change generally occurs as the next obvious step while second order change is anything but incremental. “Deep change alters the system in fundamental ways, offering a dramatic shift in direction and requiring new ways of thinking and acting” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 66).

The NeSA process is a break from the STARS system of the recent past and is inconsistent with the prevailing norm of the STARS system in Nebraska schools; therefore, for many schools in Nebraska, the phasing out of STARS and implementation of NeSA was a second order change. NeSA required a new skill set for educators in thinking and acting on assessment and testing when compared to STARS. It may or may not be congruent with personal values depending on individual educator perspectives. Initially, the STARS process was no doubt, for many Nebraska educators, a second order change as most Nebraska schools had little or no plan for assessment related to student learning. Now with the implementation of NeSA and the phasing out of STARS, a second order change relating to assessment and testing has occurred.

Second order change is difficult for people because they are lacking the “repertoire of solutions” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 67) to make the expected change comfortably. Changing the way things are done and how those involved with the change are affected impacts the success of the change. Fullan (2001) referred to the implementation dip or a “dip in performance and confidence as one encounters an

innovation that requires new skills and new understandings” or as described in the work of McREL and Marzano, a second order change would imply an implementation dip is present. “People feel anxious, fearful, confused, overwhelmed, de-skilled, cautious” (Fullan, 2001, p. 40) when part of something that they have not dealt with before is introduced. People in the implementation dip are essentially dealing with two things, “the social-psychological fear of change, and the lack of technical know-how or skills to make the change work” (Fullan, 2001, p. 41). In order to address those fears and lack of knowledge, staff members need to be involved in conversations and “transforming the culture—changing the way we do things around here . . . creating a culture of change” (Fullan, 2001, p. 44).

Second order change is difficult and an implementation dip or implementation gap can be expected as the change occurs. The complexities of change can be overwhelming and have enormous consequences, as the new concept related to the expected change must be defined by those involved in the change (Reeves, 2009, p. 85). Leadership is a crucial piece to successful change. “The good news about closing the implementation gap is that we know what to do” (Reeves, p. 89). The challenge is in convincing people to take on the change for more than the purpose of closing the implementation gap; it is to take on the human behavior involved. “Every organization—indeed, every person—suffers to some degree from a gap between intention and action. Leadership can make the difference” (Reeves, 2009, p. 90).

**Professional Development.** Reeves (2009) identified strategies that can be used to move the reality closer to the intention when change occurs within an organization, recognizing that individuals need immediate and continuous reinforcement for

meaningful change to be sustained. The first of these strategies is to embed meaningful change in an organization by creating short term wins. Short term wins can be gained through formative assessment, or as defined by Reeves, “an activity designed to give meaningful feedback to students and teachers and to improve professional practices and student achievement” (Reeves, 2009, p. 91). Having objectives that are clear and attainable allow a short-term win to be possible. Without the short-term wins, the pain and enormity of the change can be overwhelming.

The second strategy described by Reeves (2009) is to recognize effective practices simply and clearly throughout the school year, recognizing a focal point for celebrating implementation of best practices. An example of this would include teams of teachers and administrators involved in action research and working together, sharing their results. The third strategy outlined by Reeves is to emphasize effectiveness, not popularity. This involves questioning the existing culture and supporting effective practices even if they are unpopular. The fourth strategy is about making the change compelling and associated with moral imperatives, rather than compliance. Teachers and administrators can often be motivated by their internal moral sense of purpose to do what is best relating to a student’s right to an education or similar issues. Approaching change from a compliance perspective rarely brings about the commitment necessary for the change to be meaningful and long lasting (Reeves, 2009).

Leadership is a crucial component for successful change. McREL defined shared leadership as “implied shared responsibility and mutual accountability. This is particularly important when there is more than one person can do, and where several can take action for the good of the whole and individual and collective strengths can be



maximized” (McREL, 2005a, p. 72). The STARS system utilized shared leadership through development of teacher leaders and changing the ways that teachers interacted with other teachers and administrators about student achievement. NeSA development and implementation has been doing that again, with some components of the STARS system being utilized, but for a different purpose.

“Yes, leadership is about vision. But leadership is equally about creating a climate where the truth is heard and the brutal facts confronted” (Collins, 2001, p. 74). In times of transition such as a changing state assessment system in Nebraska, teachers and administrators who feel a part of a purposeful community can have conversations in search of efficiency and effectiveness. “A purposeful community is one with the collective efficacy and capability to develop and use assets to accomplish purposes and produce outcomes that matter to all community members through agreed upon processes” (McREL, 2005b, p. 12). In essence, the ability to accomplish a common purpose and produce outcomes that matter to everyone who is part of the community, is the collective efficacy of an organization. STARS provided a framework for schools to build the collective efficacy of their organizations. Transitioning to a different assessment system, NeSA, Nebraska schools were again called on to redevelop and redefine that collective efficacy.

### **Balanced Assessment System**

The transition from STARS to NeSA has forced Nebraska educators to rethink assessment and testing and how it impacts student achievement and accountability requirements. This redefining of assessment in Nebraska has led to a break from what had become familiar for most educators in the STARS system while they are learning to

work with the new NeSA system. The purposes of the two systems differ in focus; STARS was oriented towards student instruction, and NeSA was oriented towards comparative accountability among schools. As the pendulum swings, NDE and state assessment leaders suggest that a “balanced assessment system” can serve as a compromise between the two purposes.

NDE Director of Statewide Assessment, Dr. Pat Roschewski, defined a balanced assessment system as “a comprehensive set of assessment tools and adults working together to provide the ‘Big Picture of Student Achievement.’” Further, the NDE defines a balanced assessment system for Nebraska as including three components:

- national tests for the purpose of national comparison, summative in nature and defining benchmarks;
- state tests, specifically NeSA, for measurement of state content standards and for the purpose of state comparison of schools, summative in nature and benchmarks; and
- classroom based assessments for the purpose of gaining instructional information. (Roschewski, 2011)

According to Rick Stiggins, balanced assessment is defined as “an integration of classroom assessment, interim benchmark assessment and accountability tests in to a unified process that benefits learning” (Roschewski, 2011). “Different reporting formats supply different levels of detail. The ways of communicating about student achievement are varied, and we can group them into several categories: test scores, grades, narratives, portfolios, and conferences” (Stiggins, 2004, p. 295). Teachers need details about specific learning targets because they are making decisions about what goes on in their classrooms. Administrators and school boards need information about more long-range, large-group planning and resource allocation. Parents need information about ways to support their student’s learning. Each of these types of information is about

communicating the appropriate kind of information to be able to make informed decisions. Students need information about their own learning. “A single measure or one type of assessment alone cannot provide the comprehensive useful data that a balanced system of tools can provide” (Roschewski, 2011). A balance of various types of testing and assessment is necessary to provide a clearer picture of the learning that is taking place for the individual student through the varied forms of data available as part of a balanced assessment system.

In a standards based environment such as determined by NCLB, it is important that educators are clear about what students need to know and be able to do. This also requires that there are systems in place that provide data about student learning and then how to use that information to improve learning. The main idea of balance in assessment is being able to identify and understand the fundamental difference between assessment for learning and assessment of learning, recognizing that they each have a place in understanding the student and their needs. Essentially, assessment for learning is intended to help promote student achievement through student growth and improvement compared to assessment of learning, which is more of a process of documenting what a student knows or is able to do at a point in time. Assessment for learning generally happens in the classroom in the form of a self-assessment or a teacher providing feedback to a student and provides information to a teacher and student about how the student can improve in the future. In this setting, the student is somehow actively involved in the assessment process. According to Stiggins, “assessment for learning happens while learning is still underway” (2004, p. 31). These are things that happen throughout the teaching and learning process to diagnose student needs, plan the next step, and provide

feedback to students to help them improve their quality of work and feel in control of their learning. “Assessment for learning ‘is about getting better’ ” (Stiggins, 2004, p. 31). In order that assessment for learning can happen, a clear set of expectations is necessary as a starting place. In Nebraska, that set of expectations includes state standards in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies. Each Nebraska school must then determine how those standards are going to be addressed so that there is some definition of the objective at each grade level.

“Assessment of learning are those assessments that happen after learning is supposed to have occurred to determine if it did” (Stiggins, 2004, p. 31). They reflect information about student learning at a point in time to people outside of the classroom typically through things such as state assessments, standardized tests, college entrance exams, or even classroom final exams. Assessment of learning is about meeting the needs of accountability and comparability and decision makers having accurate information about student achievement.

Assessment of learning information is more commonly used by educators outside of the classroom for things such as program planning or policy making and is generally in the form of final exams or achievement tests. In this aspect of assessment, adults are the primary users of the information gathered to be used for instructional decisions (Chappuis et al., 2005, p. 34). It is not uncommon that assessment of learning information is used to make decisions about large numbers of students, including reporting data to the public and accountability decisions.

Informed instruction is a result of finding a match between the form of assessment used and the evidence it generates with the kind of information that is needed. Selection

of the appropriate assessment is the first of four considerations in finding dependable data about student learning. There must also be a sufficient number of items to test the information that it intends to sample. Assessment items or assessment tasks must be of a quality so they are clear and easily understood. Educators must anticipate as many distracting kinds of things as possible in order to keep the assessment or test valid (Chappuis et al., 2005, p. 37). “Although assessment of learning is important, it is not sufficient. Once a year assessment meets only the needs of some of those who use assessment information” (Stiggins, 2004, p. 34). “Assessments for learning help control the learning process in the classrooms. . . . This is not about accountability—those are assessments of learning. This is about getting better” (Stiggins, 2004, p. 31).

A balanced assessment system recognizes the value of both assessment for learning and assessment of learning and knows the purpose of each. Overall, assessment is intended to benefit student learning and achievement by providing information about students and their learning needs. Historically, there has been a gap between teachers and administrator’s training that has made it difficult for them to make classroom assessment work well in moving towards effective assessment for learning. Assessment of learning tools, such as achievement tests are developed by trained educators for that purpose with little input from the classroom teacher or student.

Currently, reporting and accountability in Nebraska is based on standards of learning or expectations for student learning. With that as a backdrop, schools in Nebraska must be aware of those expectations and work to establish curriculum based on those expectations. Educators from all levels within a school system need to work together to determine what student performance looks like once K-12 schooling has taken

place. For this to happen, “It means that teachers must interact with one another and plan for the contributions to be made by each K-12 team member” (Chappuis et al., 2005, p. 55). This interaction is most effective when done across grade levels or in vertical teams on a regular basis.

A locally developed, high-quality curriculum, reflecting state standards and aligned to national standards were appropriate, sufficiently specific, and consistently formatted across subjects and grade levels for easy use, is the foundation of quality assessment, because it states what should be assessed to track student progress. And when made public in a variety of ways and formats, it becomes a guide for all stakeholders to us in helping student learn. (Chappuis et al., 2005, p. 55)

Sometimes the difficulty of the curriculum is in the classroom implementation, as teacher’s instruction is the mode by which curriculum is delivered. Teachers must be prepared to help students with the broader vision of the school in mind.

Assessment must serve all users of the information it provides including classrooms, instructional support, and policy; because each of the users has different needs, no single assessment is going to meet all of the needs. Users at the classroom level will be served by the classroom level assessments involving teachers and students. To do this, it is important to understand what mastery looks like and in what sequence is most effective. Consideration must also be given to how the data gathered from this level of assessment will be communicated with students and parents (Chappuis et al., 2005, p. 61).

Users at the other levels of instructional support, such as a principal, and at the policy level, such as the superintendent or board of education, are typically better served by more standardized assessments. Decisions must be made at a district or school level about what tests to give and at what grade levels and at what point in time. The essential

question is how to be sure that all users can receive relevant student achievement information in an understandable form and in an appropriate time frame for decisions to be made (Chappuis et al., 2005, p. 63).

Assessment literacy among users of assessment data is critical to the value of assessment and the impact it can have on student learning. Information gained through assessment must be accurate in order for it to be used effectively by the various users for decision-making. For information to be used effectively, training is necessary to gain understanding of assessment purposes and potential by students, teachers, and parents.

For accuracy, attention must be paid to appropriate sample sizes, sensitivity to bias or other potentially distorting factors, communicating accurately and effectively to the end users. Communication about assessment and student achievement must be done in an efficient manner so that information is captured and retrievable in a straightforward way. District policy for the expectations of using various forms of appropriate assessment should also be in place as a framework of expectations for achievement and understanding of student learning. This expectation is the framework for ensuring that assessment for learning is developed and continues in each classroom for each student (Chappuis et al., 2005).

Beginning with clear curriculum and knowing what the intended student learning is benefits both teachers and students. A benefit of this common target is to have the common ground that it enables teachers to work with other teachers in helping students get to the identified learning targets. “Students can hit any target they can see that holds still for them” (Stiggins, 2004, p. 57). Stable targets allow student to be more involved

with their learning, and because of that involvement, potentially more successful as a student.

**Professional Development.** A productive approach to assessment is that of using a balanced assessment system, which is comprehensive and thoughtful in its approach to using assessment for the purpose of improving schools. A balanced system does not use a single test score as the only piece of information that is used to determine whether a school or a student is doing well or not. Standardized tests are designed to learn about large groups of students and are not intended to provide specific information about individual students. Classroom assessments designed for learning about the student cannot provide the broad information about a group of students that a standardized test can. Combined with good instruction, balanced assessment has the potential to help schools meet student's needs.

So that teachers and school leaders can provide the instruction linked to assessment information about students, Chappuis et al. (2005 p. 99) suggested ten competencies that support student learning.

1. The leader understands the standards of quality for student assessments and how to ensure that these standards are met in all assessments.
2. The leader understands the principles of assessment for learning and works with staff to integrate them into classroom instruction.
3. The leader understands the necessity of clear academic achievement standards, aligned classroom-level targets, and their relationship to the development of accurate assessments.
4. The leader knows and can evaluate teachers' classroom assessment competencies and helps teachers learn to assess accurately and use the results productively.
5. The leader can plan, present, or secure professional development activities that contribute to the use of sound assessment practices.
6. The leader analyzes student assessment information accurately, uses the information to improve curriculum and instruction, and assists teachers in doing the same.



7. The leader develops and implements sound assessment and assessment-related policies.
8. The leader creates the conditions necessary for the appropriate use and reporting of student achievement information, and can communicate effectively with all members of the school community about student assessment results and their relationship to improving curriculum and instruction.
9. The leader understands the attributes of a sound and balanced assessment system.
10. The leader understands the issues related to the unethical and inappropriate use of student assessment and protects students and staff from such misuse.

Competency one involves understanding that assessments evolve from needs for specific information and knowing why an assessment is given before it is administered. There must be clear targets coming from clearly defined content standards and a well-defined curriculum. Assessment methods must match the type of learning that is expected to take place. A match between the learning target and the measurement method can be obtained through performance assessment, selected response, written response as examples of various types of assessment methods. Students need to be involved in the assessment process to further the involvement in their own learning process. Communication with students and other appropriate adults is critical (Chappuis et al., 2005, p. 101).

Competency two requires that educators understand the difference between assessment of learning and assessment for learning. Teachers and students must both have a clear understanding of the identified learning targets prior to instruction taking place. Teachers must be able to coordinate those identified targets into appropriate instruction and assessment methods so that appropriate assessment either for learning or of learning is taking place. Students again, must be involved actively and informed about the assessment process and the learning targets (Chappuis et al., 2005, p. 124).

“Competency three asks leaders to ensure that classroom instruction aims are directly at learning targets that are clear to all stakeholders: teachers, students, and parents” (Chappuis et al., 2005, p. 155). This involves having a clear, well-conceived curriculum in place and using a variety of assessment methods appropriate to the learning targets. It is about understanding the alignment of instruction and assessment to state and local expectations. Evidence of this competency would include curriculum mapping or articulation between grade levels of curriculum connections.

Competency four supports teacher-learning relating to assessment competencies. There must be understanding of who and why assessment results will be used. This involves use of the learning targets and selection of proper assessment methods for the content being taught. There must also be accuracy in design of the assessments to ensure an appropriate sample of items related to learning targets and free from bias. Assessment results must be communicated with the appropriate stakeholders.

Competency five involves schools implementing and supporting an effective professional development plan. “Teachers need to learn about and practice developing and using formative classroom assessments, individually and with peers” (Chappuis et al., 2005, p. 178). Assessment training assists in implementation of the written curriculum through an increased understanding of the relationship between the two. Professional development should support assessment not just as a way to collect data about student learning, but also as good instruction.

Competency six involves using assessment data to improve curriculum and instruction through analysis of the assessments used. Standardized tests should be evaluated to determine their match to standards or expected learning targets. Care should

also be taken to determine how the standardized tests will work within the assessment system of the school. Analysis should take place to determine that assessments and tests cover the specific standards and curriculum used. This helps to determine what areas are either under or over assessed so adjustments can be made. Working in teams to evaluate provides the opportunity for staff involvement and learning.

Competency seven revolves around the formulation of assessment related policies. There should be a strong connection between student assessment and what is determined to be appropriate, including grading, homework, student placement, and even hiring policies.

Competency eight centers on the appropriate use and reporting of student achievement information and communicating effectively with the school community about that information. Helping parents and community members understand assessment and testing results should include things such as what the tests actually measure, what method of assessment is used, how scoring takes place, and what the results of the test or assessment will be used for.

Competency nine draws attention to full understanding of the differences and the connections between assessment of learning and assessment for learning. Assessment of learning and assessment for learning each have its own purpose and each requires its own attention to staff development and integration into the school setting. The differences, expectations, and uses must be communicated with students, teachers, parents, and community members to understand the information retrieved about student achievement appropriately. A balance also needs to be maintained between the state and local level between what is expected and necessary and what is appropriate and doable.

Competency ten addresses potential ethical issues surrounding testing and assessment. The well being of students should be paramount in considering assessment and testing. Confidentiality of individuals needs to be maintained, as does test security. Test preparation needs attention to be paid so that educators are committed to raising high student achievement levels, not just raising test scores. Curriculum must address content standards and learning targets that include activities that would enhance reasoning and skill improvement as part of the knowledge level activities.

Teacher's skills should include the ability to use quality assessments to measure whether or not an assessment fits with a standard or target of instruction. "Classroom assessment is about giving students information about their own learning on their way to state standards" (Chappuis et al., 2005, p. 102). Assessment results inform decisions that bear directly on students school experiences. Students should be the first users of assessment results as they use the messages they receive about their progress to decide if they are capable of being successful or not and determine how their future is to play out. Adults often overlook this reality. If students misunderstand, they may be harmed, so communication about assessment and quality assessment is a necessity (Stiggins & Knight, 1998, p. 38). "This entire professional development program is built around two driving themes: assess accurately and use assessment to benefit students, not merely to grade and sort them" (Stiggins, 2004, p. 13).

A balanced system of assessment is a system that must recognize and use established standards and guide the instructional practice for teachers, students, and policy makers. It recognizes that assessments of various styles are valuable to the various users of assessment data: students and teachers, principals and counselors, and policy

makers. Recognizing that it is the combination of the various kinds of data that the different kinds of assessments can provide is, in fact, the strength of a balanced assessment system. A balanced system communicates with the various users and decision makers regarding student learning and school improvement, giving them information to base decisions on, considering student progress as the target that all components of a balanced assessment system have in common. “A system of assessment that is in balance will ensure that the right kind of assessment is used for the right purpose and that its purpose will be to improve student learning” (Chappuis et al., 2005, p. 270).

### **Summary**

Assessment in Nebraska has changed and evolved during the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, driven primarily by federal and state legislation. It has evolved in how assessments are developed, how they are used, and how they are administered. With the passage of NCLB in 2001, Nebraska was required to establish academic standards in core curricular areas and a state testing system that met federal accountability requirements called Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). This was intended to be a measure by which schools, districts, and state were held accountability for student performance.

In the initial years of NCLB, Nebraska was allowed to use results from statewide assessments and a combination of state and local assessments. Schools in Nebraska were required to use the School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting system (STARS), NDE Rule 10, and norm-referenced testing to cover the academic content standards for accountability purposes. The STARS system used quality criteria developed with expertise from the Buros Institute, including a checklist describing the

evidence that was available to support accountability reporting. Each school district prepared a portfolio of data that was then reviewed by panel of experts and later in the STARS process, through the Peer Review process, which involved specifically trained Nebraska educators.

The STARS system gave responsibility for assessment to each district, allowing each to develop its own process. This was supported by NDE and ESUs, based on the premise that “the most important decisions about teaching and learning happen in classroom” (Gallagher & Ratzlaff, 2008, p. 50). To develop this decision-making power, extensive staff development and training regarding use of the data created through the assessment process was done across the state, involving educators from many levels and subject areas. Because each district was allowed to develop its own systems, comparison of STARS information between districts was very difficult, if not impossible. This inability to compare districts led to a newly mandated state assessment system that allowed for increased comparability between districts done through Nebraska State Accountability (NeSA).

The Nebraska Unicameral sessions of 2007 and 2008 passed Legislative Bills 1157 and 653 that shifted the focus of assessment and accountability in Nebraska schools away from the locally developed process STARS, to a focus on state level criterion-referenced tests in core curricular areas. NeSA tests were developed by teams of item writers trained in elements of design as it related to large-scale statewide assessment based on the newly revised academic standards. Tests were piloted in the electronic version the year prior to full implementation. Review and revision of the test items was completed through the governor-appointed Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) and

reviewed for reliability, validity, and calibration and equity. NeSA tests were to be phased in over a period of years, being fully implemented by 2013.

The transition from STARS to NeSA involved change for Nebraska educators. The impact of the change and how educators were supported in dealing with the change is still evolving, along with their views on how valuable the current assessment system and the data it produces is used to influence instruction. Teachers in Nebraska were trained in assessment through the STARS process and generally felt a sense of ownership as the process related to their district and their classrooms. The NeSA process changed what the educators had come to know as assessment and how they thought about and used the data that was created through the assessment process. The purpose of the two assessment systems differ in focus with STARS being student instruction oriented, and NeSA being based in comparative accountability. The break from the STARS system and transition to the NeSA is a second order change, which requires new knowledge or skills and as result, Nebraska schools are redefining and rethinking how assessment and test information may be used within their districts.

Nebraska educators are working to find the balance of the past and present assessment systems, guided by NDE and their definition of a balanced assessment system. A balanced assessment system as defined by the NDE includes national tests for the purpose of national comparison (NRT), state tests for state comparison (NeSA), and classroom based assessments for the purpose of gaining instructional information.

On the horizon, assessment policy in Nebraska has continued to evolve. In the fall of 2011, the State Board of Education approved the Nebraska Performance

Accountability System (NePAS), which is in developmental stages and is planned to grow into an accountability system using multiple measures of assessment and testing.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this explanatory mixed-methods study was to explore the perceptions of Nebraska teachers about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA and their perceptions of the influence of that shift on implementing a balanced assessment system. The timing of this study was concurrent with the transition from the STARS assessment system to the NeSA assessment system in Nebraska, so the flexibility allowed by this approach allows participants to explain their experiences within each Nebraska assessment system and within the balanced assessment system recommended by NDE.

This study on perceptions of teachers was conducted in conjunction with a parallel study of teachers' perceptions completed by Michael Teahon. A comparison between the two groups of educators is provided in the final chapter to expand the breadth of the information.

Locally developed STARS assessments have been used in Nebraska since 2001, with data being collected by the state and reported on the State of the Schools Report. The use of STARS assessments for reporting purposes has been incrementally phased out for reading and math with the implementation of NeSA-R (2010) and NeSA-M (2011). The means of reporting for STARS assessments will be eliminated as NeSA-Science (2012) is fully implemented in 2012. NeSA-Writing was carried over from the statewide writing assessment in STARS and was not considered for this study.

## Research Questions

### Phase I—Quantitative Research Questions.

1. How do teachers' perceptions differ on the value of assessment and its impact on student learning?
2. How do teachers' perceptions differ on their personal engagement in the locally developed, classroom-based, criterion-referenced assessment system within STARS, compared to their engagement in standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced testing within the NeSA system?
3. How do teachers' perceptions differ on their district's utilization of locally developed, classroom-based, criterion-referenced assessments within the STARS system, compared to the standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced testing within the NeSA system?
4. How do teachers' perceptions differ on their district's transition from the locally developed, classroom-based, criterion-referenced assessments within the STARS system, compared to the standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced test within the NeSA system?
5. How do teachers' perceptions differ on the prevalence of a balanced assessment system within their school district?

### Phase II—Qualitative Research Questions.

*Overarching question.* How do teachers' describe their local district's balanced assessment system, including local criterion-referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm-referenced tests?

***Sub-questions.***

1. What is the purpose or purposes of assessment in Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District?
2. What is the impact of STARS upon instruction and student learning in Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District?
3. What is the impact of NeSA upon instruction and student learning in Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District?

**Mixed Methods Rationale**

Researchers chose a mixed methods approach for the parallel studies because it allows both quantitative and qualitative data collection, providing an opportunity for more in-depth explanation. Quantitative study provides the opportunity to gather data from a large number of people and generalize results, whereas the qualitative study permits an in-depth exploration of a few individuals (Creswell, 2008, p. 562). The mixed methods approach allows researchers to build on the strengths of each method. Data collected in a quantitative study can incorporate the perceptions of a large group of subjects, identifying trends that can be statistically analyzed. Data collected through interviewing in a qualitative study rely on actual words of participants allowing for a more complex picture of the topic (Creswell, 2008, p. 552). Mixed methods procedures allow the collection of quantitative and qualitative data separately in two phases so that data from one source can enhance, elaborate, and complement data from the other source. By accessing both outcomes of a study as well as the process, a complex picture of social phenomenon can develop (Greene & Caracelli, 1997, p. 7). Mixed methods techniques

can greatly improve the quality of inferences made in research (Powell, Mihalas, Onwuegbuzie, Suldo, & Daley, 2008, p. 305).

The researchers selected the two-phase “explanatory” design as the mixed-methods model to most effectively meet the goals of the study. The rationale for this approach was that “the quantitative data and results provide a general picture of the research problem; more analysis, specifically through qualitative data collection, is needed to refine, extend, or explain the general picture” (Creswell, 2008, p. 560). The two phases were sequential in nature, with the quantitative collection occurring in the first phase, with follow-up qualitative data collected in the second phase. The design also captured the best of both quantitative and qualitative data—obtaining quantitative results from a population in the first phase, and then refining or elaborating these findings through an in-depth qualitative exploration in the second phase (Creswell, 2008, p. 560).

### **Mixed Methods Design**

The research followed the explanatory mixed-methods design. A priority was placed on the quantitative data by introducing it first in the study and having it represent a major aspect of the data collection. Open-ended questions were included within the quantitative survey instrument, making it descriptive in nature. A qualitative study followed in the second phase of the research, with each phase clearly defined.

### **PHASE I—Quantitative Study**

Quantitative data (survey questions) were collected in Phase I using a web-based survey of study participants’ perceptions about assessments in general, the Nebraska STARS assessment system, the NeSA assessment system, the transition from STARS to NeSA, and the perceived prevalence of a balanced assessment system. Web-based

surveys have the potential to improve efficiencies and reduce implementation time (Dillman, 2007, p. 352). In order to compare these perceptions, on-line surveys were distributed to Nebraska administrators and core area teachers (reading/language arts, mathematics, and science in grades 3 through 8 and grade 11.) The collection of quantitative data was followed with the collection of qualitative data in the second phase (Phase II) of the study for the purpose of assisting in the explanation and interpretation of the findings.

**Content validity.** Two strategies implemented to improve the content validity of the survey included evaluation of the instrument by an expert and the use of a pilot survey with educators with a background in Nebraska assessment, but ineligible for the study because they served districts outside of Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District.

An expert in assessment from the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) was asked to evaluate the survey instrument from Phase I and was given an opportunity to provide written feedback (Creswell, 2005, p. 165). Revisions to the survey instrument were made per the recommendations of the expert. The NDE expert was asked to recommend small, medium, and large public school districts within the 1st and 2nd Congressional Districts that had a history of district-wide engagement in the Nebraska assessment systems to participate in a pilot of the survey instrument for the second strategy. Recommendations for educators to be asked to pilot the survey were solicited from NDE because of a need for experience and familiarity of Nebraska assessment procedures.

Contact information for 60 educators was collected from administrators in the six recommended pilot schools and the web-based survey was distributed using the Qualtrics

web-based survey delivery engine for the second validity strategy. Ten Nebraska administrators, including superintendents, secondary principals, and elementary principals, and 19 elementary and secondary teachers representative of the curriculum areas of language arts/reading, math, and science reviewed and completed the Phase 1 pilot survey. The respondents were also asked to provide written comments on the individual survey items in text boxes provided at the end of each survey section and at the end of the survey.

Suggestions for strategies to improve the clarity of survey items were implemented as a result of the pilot study. In addition, open-ended qualitative items were added at the end of each survey section for the final survey. The recommendations of an expert in assessment and the suggestions from pilot survey participants were used to refine the survey instrument for construct validity (Creswell, 2005, p. 367).

**External validity.** Procedures to be used to increase external validity of the Phase I quantitative survey were addressed through the use of the following techniques:

- Procedures to encourage as many people as possible to respond to the study's surveys (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010, p. 193). All potential participants were encouraged through introductory email messages, letters, and phone calls to school administrators of the sample population, along with follow-up emails as the time frame of the study progressed to encourage completion of the survey.
- Examination of demographic information of participants to determine that they were similar to the larger sample size population.

**Internal validity.** Threats to internal validity were minimized, as the original survey after initial evaluation of the survey instrument was not altered. Additionally, researchers considered similarity in experience, assignment, school size, and geographic location as data to be collected from administrator and teacher participants. While administrators and teachers had varying levels of experience with state assessment in Nebraska that included experience working with the STARS process, as well as experience working with the NeSA process, all eligible administrators and teachers were considered. The educators were similarly assigned as administrators or teachers teaching within core areas. Finally, while the educators are serving in districts of varying sizes, the districts are relatively similar due to their rural nature and location in outstate Nebraska.

***Institutional contact.*** An introductory letter (Appendix C) was sent on October 26, 2011, to superintendents of all 166 school districts within the 3rd Congressional District of Nebraska to introduce the researchers and to describe the study. The letter provided notice of an electronic message (Appendix D), sent on October 31, 2011, which provided additional explanation of the study. The message also requested email addresses of principals and assessment coordinators, as well as those of reading/language arts, math, and science teachers in grades 3 through 8 and grade ll. The superintendents were given the option to enter the addresses within the body of the message or to complete and return as an attachment. Email addresses were compiled by the researchers and organized by school. Reminder emails (Appendix E) were sent on November 21, 2011, to superintendents who failed to respond to the original request for information.

Superintendents or their designees submitted contact information for 1,624 educators from 92 school districts (55%) from Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District.

**Reliability.** Reliability was calculated to measure the ability of the research instrument to consistently measure each variable. Upon the completion of the survey administration, the researchers calculated a Cronbach alpha for each of the five general scales, the ten sub-scales, and two expanded sub-scales to determine the internal consistency of the survey instrument (Creswell, 2005, p. 164). The Cronbach alpha, also called the coefficient alpha, indicates how closely related a set of items are as a group.

Internal consistency was first evaluated for the general scales, which were based upon the five sections of the survey instrument (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Reliability by General Scales*

General Scales	Number of Items	Coefficient alpha
1: General perspective of assessment	5	.908
2: STARS assessment process	16	.940
3: NeSA Statewide Tests	16	.912
4: Transition from STARS to NeSA	9	.762
5: Balanced assessment system	7	.802

Internal consistency was then evaluated for the sub-scales, which were based upon the ten sub-groups from within the final four sections of the survey instrument (see Table 2).



Finally, internal consistency was evaluated for two expanded sub-scales based upon the two sub-groups from STARS (section 2) and from NeSA (section 3) (see Table 3).

Table 2  
*Reliability by Sub-scales*

Sub-scale	Number of Items	Coefficient alpha
1: STARS-Personal engagement	6	.850
2: STARS-Personal improvement	6	.933
3: STARS-District improvement	5	.918
4: NeSA-Personal engagement	6	.725
5: NeSA-Personal improvement	6	.928
6: NeSA-District improvement	5	.912
7: Education on assessments	5	.817
8: District emphasis on assessments	4	.802
9: Engagement in balanced assessment system	3	.645
10: District assessment practices	3	.845

Table 3  
*Reliability by Expanded Sub-scales*

Expanded sub-scale	Number of Items	Coefficient alpha
1: STARS-Personal engagement & improvement	12	.872
2: NeSA-Personal engagement & improvement	12	.807

A Coefficient alpha of .7 or greater is typically considered an acceptable level of consistency using the Cronbach alpha method for determining reliability. Sub-scale Element 9: Engagement in a balanced assessment system, was the only scale or sub-scale

that had a Coefficient alpha of less than .7. This is primarily due to the limited number of items (three) included within the sub-scale. Only minimal improvement would be realized if an item was removed (.002), so the researchers determined the value of the item within the sub-scale merited no change. Therefore, no items were removed from consideration in any scale due to the strength of internal consistency demonstrated by this Cronbach alpha measure.

*Population and sampling.* The population considered for the parallel studies was administrators and teachers in 166 public school districts representing over 37,000 students and located within the 3rd Congressional District of Nebraska, which encompassed approximately three-fourths of Nebraska geographically and 75 of 93 counties. The number of superintendents serving in school districts located within the 3rd Congressional District was 158 when accounting for superintendents serving in multiple districts. The estimated number of building level administrators serving in 3rd Congressional District schools was 400, with the estimated number of teachers being over 10,000. These estimates were based upon 2010-11 numbers reported by schools on the State of the Schools report posted on the Nebraska Department of Education website (see Table 4).

Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District is populated by rural, agricultural-oriented communities and stretches from the Wyoming border on the west to the Missouri River on the east, with only the areas around the Omaha and Lincoln areas excluded. (Smith, n.d.). The 3rd Congressional District was selected based on the researchers' desire to capture the essence of assessment in greater rural Nebraska where teachers and

Table 4

*Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District*

	Population	Sample	.%
School Districts	166	92	55
Enrollment	100,815*	37,049*	37
Superintendents	158	41	26
Building Administrators	404*	74	18
Teachers	10,316*	334	3

\*Estimated values

administrators often serve in multiple and varying roles within a single district. As all public schools in Nebraska have experience in STARS and NeSA, the administrators and teachers selected for this study have common experiences from which to draw. Similar organizational structures, staffing, student populations, and staff assignments allowed for consistency in sampling.

The STARS and NeSA assessment systems were in different stages in their evolution, as STARS was in its waning years while NeSA was being newly implemented, hence the current blended system. The final STARS structure evolved into a complex and often formalized system of staff training, assessment development, and collection of achievement data by continuous internal and external evaluation of its procedures. Its relevance was diminished with the passage of LB 1157 in 2008 and the implementation of the NeSA system. The NeSA system was still emerging as it was in its third year of implementation with the 2011-2012 school year. NeSA will continue to evolve from its initial structure as it becomes fully implemented across the state.

**Administrators.** Administrators chosen to participate in the study included superintendents, principals, and assessment coordinators who were charged with establishing a philosophy of assessment for the district, developing procedures for administering the assessments, and determining strategies to utilize assessment results. While the level of involvement varies by size of district, all superintendents were ultimately responsible for assessment. Superintendents were still engaged or informed in districts that have personnel to whom the primary responsibility of assessment was delegated. Superintendents may have been even more directly involved in other districts.

Principals were selected for the study as their role in assessment is often critical to buildings because of their role as instructional leaders. They often provide the link between the data and instruction. Finally, assessment coordinators were included in districts that had the resources to delegate this specific assignment to someone beyond the principal or superintendent. Personnel in this position may be identified as an administrator or as a teacher, depending upon the staffing philosophy of the district.

**Teachers.** Teachers for the parallel study were selected primarily from the core areas of reading/language arts, mathematics, and science, as those were the three curricular areas represented in both STARS and NeSA assessments. While the entire teaching staff shared the responsibility of teaching reading, writing, and mathematics in cross-curricular models, it is assumed that familiarity with the assessment systems would be relatively limited beyond the defined eligibility for the sample.

The core area teachers selected for the study were limited to those teaching in grade levels 3 through 8 and grade 11, as NeSA assessments are administered to students in these grades. While STARS assessments were only reported at grades 4, 8, and 11,

specific standards could also be assessed and reported outside grade level, thus providing familiarity with the process for core teachers in grades 3, 5, 6 and 7.

**Survey instrument and procedures.** A survey instrument was distributed to all eligible educators. The 53 questions in the survey were divided into five sections, which each concluded with an open-ended question. The section on balanced assessment systems contained an additional open-ended question concerning the respondent's perception of the prevalence of a balanced assessment system within their school. Sections for the collection of demographics (section 6, items 6.1 to 6.6) and for consent to be considered for the second phase of the study (section 7, item 7.1) were at the end of the survey.

An initial baseline of individual participants' beliefs about assessment in general (section 1, items 1.1 to 1.5) was established, which included its importance in planning for instruction, in evaluating student progress and in improving student learning. Belief about the importance of assessment in school improvement and its' importance as an indicator in accountability were also investigated.

After the baseline was established, the researchers collected parallel data on participants' perceptions of STARS (section 2, 2.1 to 2.16) and NeSA (section 3, questions 3.1 to 3.16) within the next two sections of the survey. Individual engagement and improvement within the two systems was investigated. The participants' perceptions of improvement within the district due to the two assessment systems were also considered.

An additional section followed in the survey to investigate the strategies utilized by schools in their transition from STARS to NeSA (section 4, questions 4.1 to 4.9). The

educators' perceptions about the district's response to the change in assessment systems and their personal involvement in the transition were investigated.

The STARS and NeSA sections were designed to set the stage for the final quantitative section - the primary purpose of the study- which was to determine their impact on a balanced assessment system within schools as is recommended by NDE (section 5, questions 5.1 to 5.7). School districts vary in their responses to assessment directives defined in Nebraska statute. Variations existed because of philosophy, competency, and resources, or a combination thereof. Participants were asked about each of the components of a balanced assessment system, including locally developed criterion-referenced assessments, statewide criterion-referenced assessments, and national norm-referenced assessments.

- Are locally developed criterion-referenced assessments, statewide criterion-referenced assessments, and national assessments used to question, modify, and adjust teaching?
- Do local districts define how each assessment type fits into effective teaching and learning?

Finally, participants were asked to give their perceptions on the existence of a balanced assessment system within their district in an open-ended question. The concluding question gave participants an opportunity to make general comments that addressed the assessment system currently used within their district.

**Error reduction.** Non-response error had the potential to dramatically impact the dynamics of the parallel studies, which focused on administrators and core area teachers with experience in Nebraska assessment systems. All school districts within Nebraska's

3rd Congressional District were included in the survey population to reduce coverage error. Superintendents had the option to submit an alternative person to serve as a district contact to assist the researchers in collection of additional email addresses if, as superintendents, they felt it was necessary for completion of the request.

***Participant notification.*** The superintendents were asked to personalize a pre-notice message template (Appendix F) provided by the researchers on November 29, 2011, designed to introduce the researchers and encourage participation in the survey. An electronic cover letter (Appendix G) was sent the following day, November 30, 2011, to 1,621 participants. The cover letter included an introduction of the researchers, an invitation to participate in the study, and a link to a web-based survey hosted by Qualtrics, a commercial survey engine.

***Survey distribution.*** 550 of the 1,621 educators, (33.9%) who received the invitation to participate chose to open the survey, where they were greeted with the title, the purpose of the study and an “Informed Consent Form.” They were given the option to provide consent and enter the survey or to decline participation and exit the survey. A follow-up email (Appendix H) was sent on the Monday of the following week (December 5, 2011) encouraging them to complete the survey. A second and final reminder (Appendix I) was sent later that week (December 8, 2011) with final encouragement and notification of the closing of the survey on December 9, 2011. While researchers were concerned that the length of the study may have resulted in survey-fatigue, 449 of the 550 (81.6%) who opened the survey elected to complete the survey.

Survey responses were initially stored on Qualtrics’ secure server and eventually downloaded to Excel before being imported into SPSS for analysis. Of the original

1,621 educators, 449 (27.6%) completed the survey. While the response rate was lower than desired, a low response rate is typical for a web-based survey (Shih & Fan, 2009, p. 31).

*Quantitative data collection and analysis.* Quantitative data collection and analysis were done using a five-step process described by Plano Clark and Creswell, which included scoring the data, preparing the data for analysis, analyzing the data to answer descriptive research questions, analyzing the data to test comparison and relationship hypotheses, and reporting the results of data analysis. The survey was designed to include a numeric score to each response for each question on the survey instrument (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010, p. 212). A five-point likert scale was used, which included Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neither Agree nor Disagree (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5). Items 4.6 through 4.9 used a range, which ranged from “Substantially Decreased” to “Substantially Increased.” Information about the number of participants completing the survey and demographic data was also gathered.

Statistical significance was determined through three methods, which included repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA), regression, and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). The repeated measures ANOVA was used to determine if there were differences between related means for each of the effects based on the general scales or themes. Effects that were not statistically significant were eliminated for additional analysis. A regression analysis was used when the homogeneity of regression assumption was violated (i.e., when enrollment interacted with one of the predictors). Finally, an ANCOVA was used when the continuous variable (enrollment)



did not interact with the categorical predictor variables. An ANCOVA is a merger of ANOVA and regression.

Descriptive data including the mean, mode, and standard deviation were calculated for each of the five general scales and were based upon demographic effects. These statistics were used to help determine central tendency, variability, and relative standing regarding each of the identified research questions (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010, p. 214). Information gathered was used to create inferential statistics to discover how variables are related. Results from various stages of the analysis process were gathered in statistical tables reflecting the findings of the quantitative portion of the study.

***Variables and effects.*** Variables defined for the study and based on general scales included: (a) beliefs on assessment, (b) perceptions of STARS, (c) perceptions of NeSA, (d) perceptions of the transition from STARS to NeSA, and (e) perceptions of a balanced assessment system. Personal engagement variables (f), which included activity and understanding, were defined for both STARS and NeSA. In addition, district improvement variables (g) were also defined for the two assessment systems.

Analysis of the variables was based upon multiple effects, including administrative role, gender, level of the building, responsibility for curriculum, and the enrollment of the district. Position was also considered as the parallel studies were combined for comparative purposes. While descriptive statistics by effect were reported for all variables within the tables, explanatory narrative was only provided for effects deemed to be significant for the variable. Data analysis procedures were completed by the researchers in consultation with the Nebraska Evaluation and Research Center

(NEAR) at UNL, whose purpose is to assist UNL faculty and students with statistical, measurement, and research methodology.

## **PHASE II—Qualitative Study**

Information was also collected about the experiences of teachers as schools in Nebraska transitioned from the STARS assessment system to the NeSA system. The overarching research question was, “How do teachers describe their local district’s balanced assessment system including local criterion-referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm-referenced test?” Sub-questions for the qualitative portion of the research included:

1. What is the purpose or purposes of assessment in Nebraska’s 3rd Congressional District?
2. What is the impact of STARS upon instruction and student learning in Nebraska’s 3rd Congressional District?
3. What is the impact of NeSA upon instruction and student learning in Nebraska’s 3rd Congressional District?

The results of the Phase 1 survey led the researchers to explore further qualitative data providing understanding and insights into the educator’s perceptions regarding these experiences by focusing on five different themes: (a) personal beliefs about assessment, (b) perceptions about the STARS system, (c) perceptions about the newly implemented Nebraska Statewide assessment tests (NeSA), (d) experiences with the transition from STARS to NeSA, and (e) progress towards a balanced assessment system. For purposes of this study, a balanced assessment system was defined as the use of criterion-referenced assessments, NeSA test results, and national norm-referenced tests.

Flexibility within the qualitative approach allowed the analysis to evolve according to the information that was gathered from study participants. The additional collection of qualitative data allows for further examination of unexplained or surprising results (Creswell, 2002, p. 215). One of the interesting things that can be accomplished using a mixed methods approach is the ability to explore outliers or individual participants that do not fit the expected results (Simpson, 2011, p. 29)

**Participants.** All survey participants had the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions at the end each of the five themes outlined in the survey. Participants included teachers from several school districts representing various sizes of schools from throughout Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District.

A second opportunity for collection of qualitative data involved personal interviews with selected teachers. Purposeful sampling was used to select teachers for interviews and was based on their personal perceptions of STARS and their personal perceptions of NeSA. The teachers selected for interviews represented school districts of various sizes and demographic characteristics. Three elementary teachers and one middle school teacher were selected for interviews, with one selected from each quadrant described below. Data collected from the interviews, when combined with the comments from the open-ended survey questions, provided a rich and thorough explanation of findings generated in the first phase of the study (see Table 5).

**Data collection procedures.** Responses to open-ended questions were collected in conjunction with the web-based survey from Phase I, stored on Qualtrics' secure server and downloaded into a Filemaker Pro database. The functionality of the database

Table 5

*Phase II Interview Selection Matrix*

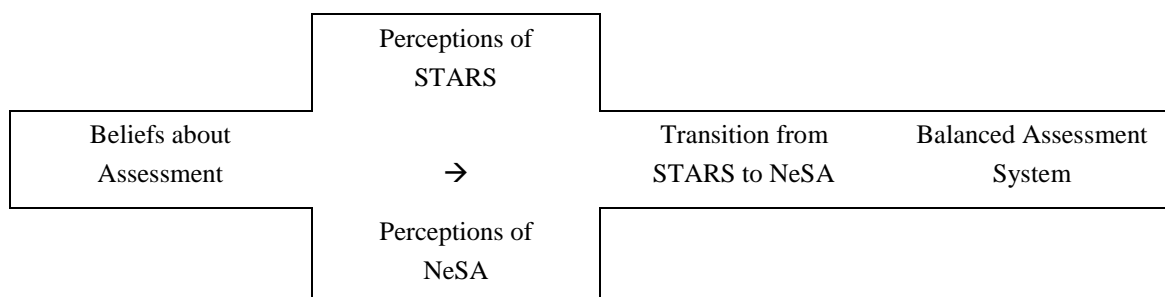
+++ Improved by STARS +++ - Not Improved by NeSA -	+++ Improved by STARS +++ +++ Improved by NeSA +++
- Not Improved by STARS - - Not Improved by NeSA -	- Not Improved by STARS - +++ Improved by NeSA +++

allowed for effective sorting, searching, and categorizing of themes discovered for each of the survey sections.

Teacher interviews provided additional qualitative data. Interview candidates were first contacted by phone and then sent supporting information electronically. The materials included a consent form, the interview protocol and the interview procedures, which allowed the opportunity for review of the items prior to the interview. Personal interviews with teachers were completed in a mutually agreed upon location after the teacher had the opportunity to review and sign the informed consent form. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher or by a transcriptionist that had completed confidentiality training as required by the IRB.

**Data analysis procedures.** The formal analysis of the data began with a preliminary exploratory analysis. The responses were read as a whole in order to gain a general impression of what respondents were saying and how it related or didn't relate to the quantitative portion of the study. The researcher followed by segmenting and labeling text into broad themes. "The objective of the coding process is for the inquirer to make sense of the data by dividing it into text or image segments, labeling the segments with codes, examining codes for overlap and redundancy, and collapsing the

codes into broad themes” (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010, p. 281). As the interview protocol was intentionally aligned with the Phase I survey, the primary themes identified through the qualitative analysis aligned accordingly. The strategy of aligning the Phase II interview protocol with the Phase I survey paralleled the explanatory mixed-methods design selected for the study. After review and reflection, personal beliefs about assessment, perceptions about the STARS system, perceptions about NeSA, experiences with the transition from STARS to NeSA, and progress towards a balanced assessment system were determined to be the major themes for the qualitative portion of the study. Further coding of the responses provided insight into general categories within each of the broad themes of the study (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Study organizational chart.

Qualitative research is subjective by nature, and each researcher has worked to validate the findings through the use of thorough and complete review of survey comments, field notes, and interview scripts, keeping in mind any personal biases that he or she may have. Each researcher has served as a teacher, a principal, and a superintendent and has also had extensive training in assessment and leadership through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. In addition, each researcher recognized assessment

as an important part of providing quality education for students in all curricular areas and age groups. These personal perspectives, although related to the heart of the study, have been bracketed throughout the research process to ensure that the results and findings of the study are not skewed.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this explanatory mixed methods study was to explore the perceptions of Nebraska teachers about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA and their perceptions of the influence of that shift on implementing a balanced assessment system. A parallel study concerning administrators' perceptions of assessment was also conducted by Michael Teahon, allowing researchers to compare perceptions of administrators and teachers.

Educators from 92 public school districts from within Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District were surveyed using an online survey developed by the researchers from a review of the literature. The survey was organized around five research questions that focused on the general perception of assessment, personal engagement in STARS and NeSA, their district's utilization of STARS and NeSA, Nebraska's transition between STARS and NeSA, and the prevalence of a balanced assessment system. An open-ended qualitative question was included at the end of each survey section and used to frame the questions for interviews in the qualitative second phase of the study.

#### **Research Questions**

One primary research question guided this study: "How do teachers describe their district's balanced assessment system including local criterion referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm referenced tests?"

Five research questions frame the collection and analysis of data within the Phase I quantitative portion of the study.

1. Do teachers' perceptions differ on the value of assessment and its impact on student learning?
2. Do teachers' perceptions differ on their personal engagement in the locally developed, classroom based, criterion-referenced assessment system within STARS compared to their engagement in standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced testing within the NeSA system?
3. Do teachers' perceptions differ on their district's utilization of locally developed, classroom based, criterion-referenced assessments within the STARS system compared to the standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced testing within the NeSA system?
4. Do teachers' perceptions differ on their district's transition from the locally developed, classroom based, criterion referenced assessments within the STARS system compared to the standardized, statewide, criterion referenced test within the NeSA system?
5. Do teachers' perceptions differ on the prevalence of a balanced assessment system within their school district?

### **Participants**

The survey population for the parallel studies consisted of administrators and teachers in 166 public school districts within Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District. Superintendents from each of the school districts were asked to submit contact information for administrators and teachers with a background in Nebraska assessment



systems. Contact information for 1621 educators was submitted by 92 of the 162 school districts ranging from 252 contacts from a large district to a single contact from a small district. The potential respondents, including 277 administrators and 1,344 teachers, received an email describing the study and containing an individualized link to the survey on November 30, 2012. Of the 1,621 educators who were invited to participate in the parallel studies, 550 started the survey with 449 completing the survey (27.7% of potential participants) (see Table 6).

Table 6

*Response Rate*

Source	Sample	Respondents	%
Administrators	277	115	41.5
Teachers	1,344	334	24.9
Total	1,621	449	27.7

Responses were organized around five demographic areas, that included teaching area, gender, grade level, enrollment of the district and whether or not they had defined responsibilities with curriculum. With 127 responses, the largest teaching area was those who were teaching in multiple areas. Individual teaching areas represented in the survey included 82 responses in reading/language arts, 65 in mathematics, 44 in science, and 16 responses in “other” areas. Seventy-eight percent of the teachers were female, while only 16% claimed responsibilities in curriculum.

Building levels were purposely left ambiguous due to the various organizational structures within Nebraska schools. Individual respondents were able to select the level

or levels of their particular assignment according to the structure within their local school district. Respondents selecting more than one level were assigned at the district level for this study. Elementary school teachers made up the largest subgroup, with 125 of survey respondents teaching at this level (see Table 7).

Table 7

*Teachers*

Source	N=334	%
Area		
Reading/Language Arts	82	25
Mathematics	65	19
Science	44	13
Other	16	5
Multiple Areas	127	38
Gender		
Male	73	22
Female	261	78
Level		
District	65	19
Elementary School	125	37
Middle School	56	17
Secondary School	88	27
Curriculum Responsibilities		
Yes	54	16
No	280	84

**Pilot Procedures**

After receiving recommendations from an assessment expert, modifications were made to the survey and the survey was piloted with Nebraska educators serving in

districts outside of Nebraska's 3rd congressional district. Ten Nebraska administrators and 19 teachers reviewed and completed the survey.

Suggestions for strategies to improve the clarity of survey items were implemented as a result of the pilot study. In addition, open-ended qualitative items were added at the end of each survey section to give respondents the opportunity to comment on each of the themes.

### **Findings**

The findings of the Phase I quantitative study are organized in two arrangements. In the first arrangement, results are organized by effect including teaching area, gender, level, curriculum responsibilities, and enrollment. The tables and narratives within this structure are used to provide readers the opportunity to compare perceptions across the broad themes of the study: (a) personal beliefs about assessment, (b) perceptions about the STARS system, (c) perceptions of statewide NeSA tests, (d) experiences with the transition from STARS to NeSA, and (e) the prevalence of a balanced assessment system.

The second arrangement reports results organized around the five research questions that addressed: (a) the value of assessments and their impact on student learning, (b) personal engagement with STARS compared to the NeSA system, (c) the district's utilization of STARS compared to NeSA, (d) the transition from STARS to NeSA, and (e) the prevalence of a balanced assessment system.

Each of the five effects was analyzed for significance and significance is noted within each of the tables ( $p < .05$ ).

**Teaching area.** The responses of the 334 teachers who submitted the survey were analyzed within three specific teaching areas: reading/language arts, mathematics,

and science. Teachers not falling within these subgroups were either designated “other” or as teaching in multiple areas. Aggregate mean scores were calculated per effect. In addition, an overall average mean score by effect was calculated to provide a method for comparability with each of the five themes given equal weight.

The overall average mean scores for all of the area subgroups were very similar ranging from a high of 3.71 for multiple area teachers to a low of 3.49 for those in the “other” category. The overall mean scores for mathematics and science teachers were also lower than the average for all teachers.

All teacher subgroups indicated confidence in assessment in general, as all aggregate means were at or above 4.00. Teachers in all subgroups also scored STARS higher than NeSA. Mean scores for the transition from STARS to NeSA and for the district’s use of a balanced assessment system fell midway between neutral and agree (see Table 8).

A more detailed look at teacher perspectives is reported within expanded themes. Respondents addressed the personal impact of STARS and NeSA in the areas of engagement and improvement of understanding. Perceptions of improvement at the district level were also addressed. Questions addressing the transition from STARS to NeSA focused on opportunities for training and education on the assessment systems and on the amount of emphasis placed on each system. The use of local criterion-referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm-referenced assessments on both the personal and district level were analyzed. Finally, language arts teachers were more confident than their peers on the prevalence of a balanced assessment system within their district (see Table 9).

Table 8

*Themes by Teaching Area*

Source	Reading/ Language Arts N=82	Mathematics N=65	Science N=44	Other N=16	Multiple N=127	Total N=334
1. Beliefs about assessment	4.06	4.14	4.07	4.00	4.20	4.13
2. STARS	3.75	3.63	3.61	3.41	3.69	3.67
3. NeSA	3.32	3.24	3.13	3.15	3.42	3.31
4. Transition from STARS to NeSA*	3.63	3.48	3.43	3.51	3.63	3.57
5. Use of a balanced assessment system	3.63	3.49	3.53	3.36	3.63	3.58
All Themes	3.68	3.60	3.55	3.49	3.71	3.65

\*Significant at .05 level.

Table 9

*Expanded Themes by Teaching Area*

Assessments are used:	Reading/ Language Arts N=82	Mathematics N=65	Science N=44	Other N=16	Multiple Areas N=127	Total N=334
1. assessments in general	4.06	4.14	4.07	4.00	4.20	4.13
2. STARS						
a. personal engagement	4.00	3.95	3.84	3.54	3.84	3.89
b. personal improvement	3.64	3.46	3.48	3.30	3.66	3.58
c. personal perception	3.85	3.74	3.69	3.43	3.77	3.76
d. district improvement	3.57	3.45	3.49	3.38	3.54	3.52
3. NeSA						
a. personal engagement	3.62	3.51	3.27	3.31	3.56	3.51
b. personal improvement	3.15	3.03	3.01	2.79	3.31	3.15
c. personal perceptions	3.40	3.27	3.14	3.06	3.42	3.33
d. district improvement	3.15	3.17	3.11	3.39	3.39	3.25
4. Transition from STARS to NeSA*						
a. education on assessment	3.57	3.36	3.27	3.36	3.38	3.41
b. emphasis by district	3.72	3.63	3.64	3.69	3.95	3.78
5. Use of a balanced assessment system						
a. engagement	3.64	3.67	3.62	3.44	3.70	3.65
b. defined by district	3.49	3.19	3.39	3.10	3.49	3.40
c. used by district	4.02	3.86	3.66	3.88	3.88	3.88

\*Significant at .05 level.

**Gender.** Female teachers were more positive than their male counterparts on all five themes. Males and females were both more positive about STARS than about NeSA. The aggregate mean score for males on NeSA was close to the neutral position at 3.09. This represented the lowest aggregate mean score for the gender subgroups by theme. Beliefs about assessment and the use of a balanced assessment system were both significant by gender ( $p < .05$ ) (see Table 10).

Table 10

*Variables by Gender*

Source	Male N=73	Female N=261	Total N=334
1. Beliefs about assessment*	3.93	4.18	4.13
2. STARS	3.54	3.71	3.67
3. NeSA	3.09	3.37	3.31
4. Transition from STARS to NeSA	3.49	3.59	3.57
5. Use of a balanced assessment system*	3.39	3.63	3.58
All Themes	3.49	3.70	3.65

\*Significant at the .05 level.

**Levels.** The 334 teachers were also asked to identify the level or levels of their particular assignment according to the structure of local school district. As noted earlier, respondents selecting more than one level were assigned to the district level because of the global perspective of their assignment. NeSA was the only variable considered significant by level ( $p < .05$ ).

The aggregate mean scores by theme for elementary teachers and middle school teachers were higher than the other subgroups in every theme except for the transition from STARS to NeSA.

Teachers at every level were relatively positive about general perception of assessment, with an aggregate mean score of 4.13. Secondary teachers' aggregate mean score of 3.13 on NeSA was the lowest of the analysis by level (see Table 11).

**Curriculum responsibilities.** While all teachers have responsibility in curriculum due to the nature of their positions, only 16% of respondents indicated that it was formally part of their assignment. A teacher's level of expertise in curriculum varies dramatically due to situations at the local level. NeSA, the transition from STARS to NeSA, and the use of a balanced assessment system were significant by curriculum responsibilities ( $p < .05$ ).

The 54 teachers who indicated that they had formal responsibilities in curriculum were only slightly more positive than those without formal responsibilities when comparing each of the individual themes and the overall average of all themes (see Table 12).

**Enrollment.** The 92 school districts represented ranged from a small district with less than 100 students to a large district of over 9,000 students. Teacher belief in assessment increased as the size of the district increased. However, while teacher confidence in NeSA was also higher in larger districts, it was substantially lower for STARS as the districts became larger. In addition, teachers in larger districts who supported NeSA over STARS were also more confident in the prevalence of a balanced



Table 11

*Variables by Level*

Source	District N=65	Elementary N=125	Middle N=56	Secondary N=88	Total N=334
1. Beliefs about assessment	3.97	4.17	4.23	4.12	4.13
2. STARS	3.58	3.70	3.76	3.63	3.67
3. NeSA*	3.20	3.49	3.32	3.13	3.31
4. Transition from STARS to NeSA	3.56	3.60	3.55	3.55	3.57
5. Use of a balanced assessment system	3.48	3.66	3.60	3.52	3.58
All Themes	3.54	3.72	3.69	3.59	3.65

\*Significant at the .05 level.

Table 12

*Variables by Curriculum Responsibilities*

Source	Yes N=54	No N=280	Total N=334
1. Beliefs about assessment	4.21	4.11	4.13
2. STARS	3.80	3.64	3.67
3. NeSA*	3.46	3.28	3.31
4. Transition from STARS to NeSA*	3.70	3.55	3.57
5. Use of a balanced assessment system*	3.72	3.55	3.58
All Themes	3.78	3.63	3.65

\*Significant at the .05 level.

assessment system within their district. Conversely, teachers in smaller districts who were more confident in STARS were less confident in the prevalence of a balanced assessment system. Confidence in the transition between STARS and NeSA decreased slightly as districts became larger. The differences in the means are significant for the belief in assessment, STARS and the balanced assessment system effects ( $p < .05$ ) (see Figures 2-6).

### **Findings by research question.**

*Value of assessments and their impact on student learning.* Teachers varied in their perceptions of the importance of assessment in the learning of the students within their charge. Survey participants were asked questions about the importance of assessment in planning for instruction, evaluating student progress, improving student

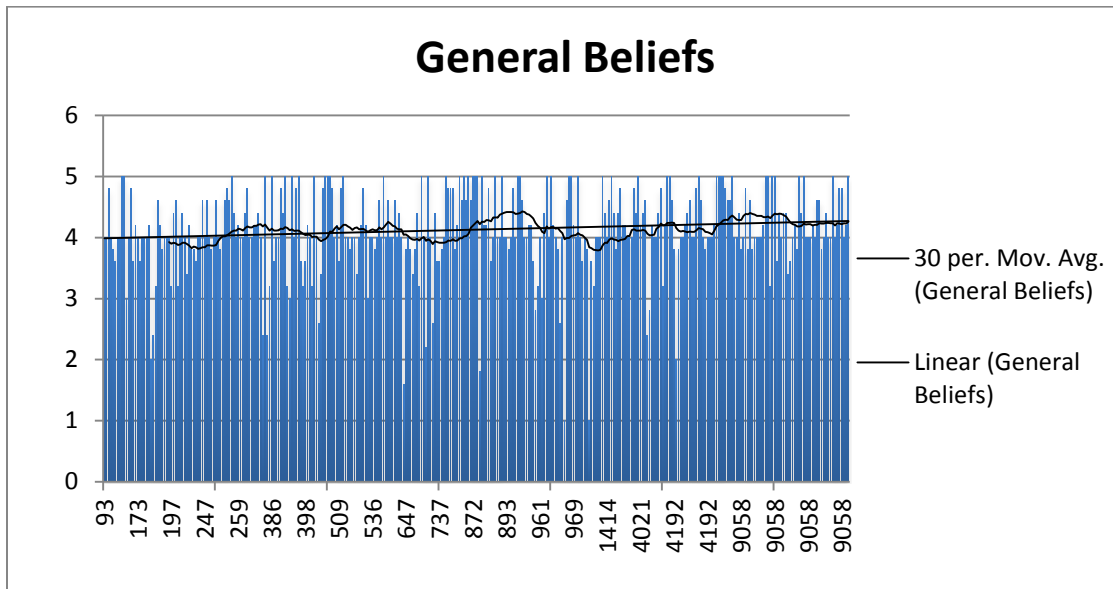


Figure 2. General beliefs.

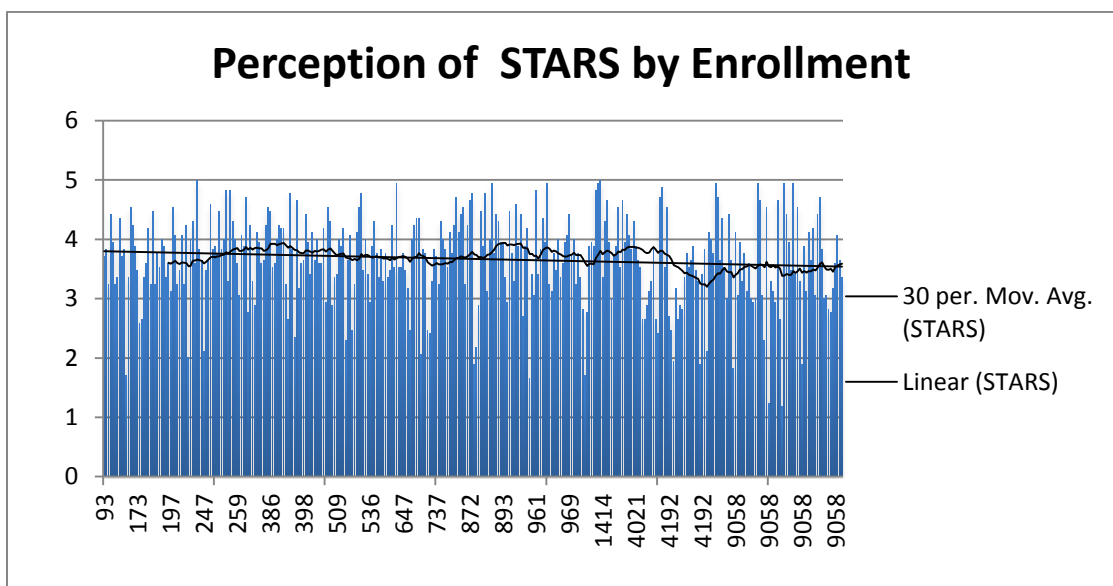


Figure 3. Perception of STARS by enrollment.

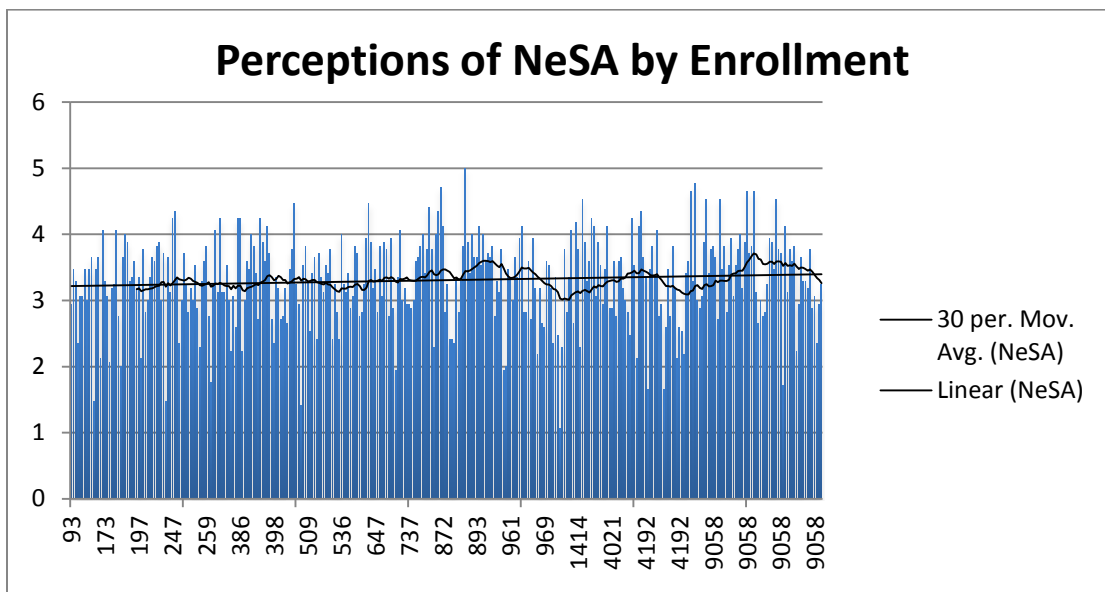


Figure 4. Perceptions of NeSA by enrollment.

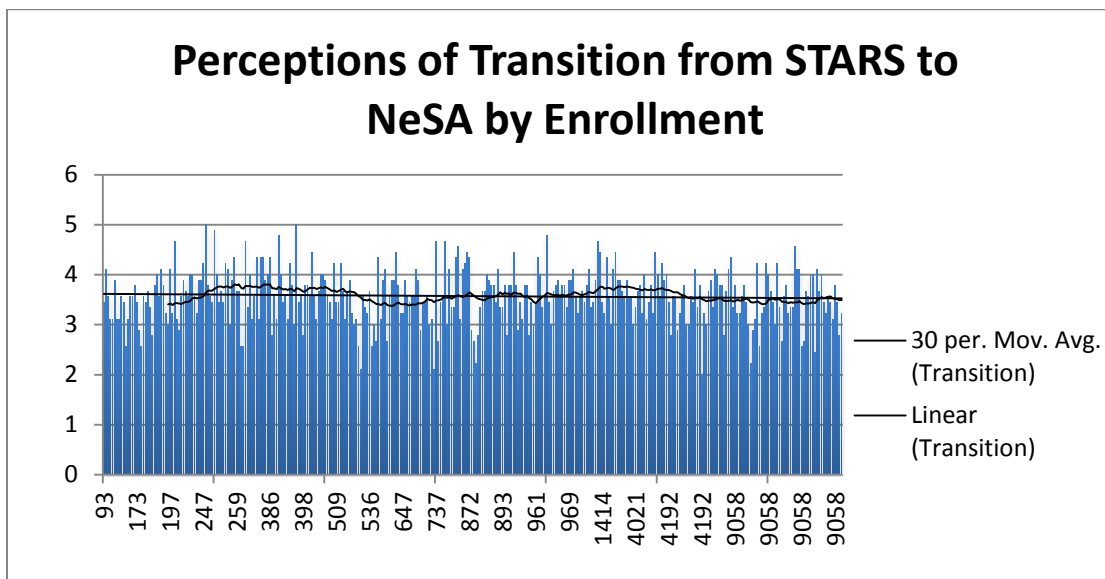


Figure 5. Perceptions of transition from STARS to NeSA by enrollment.

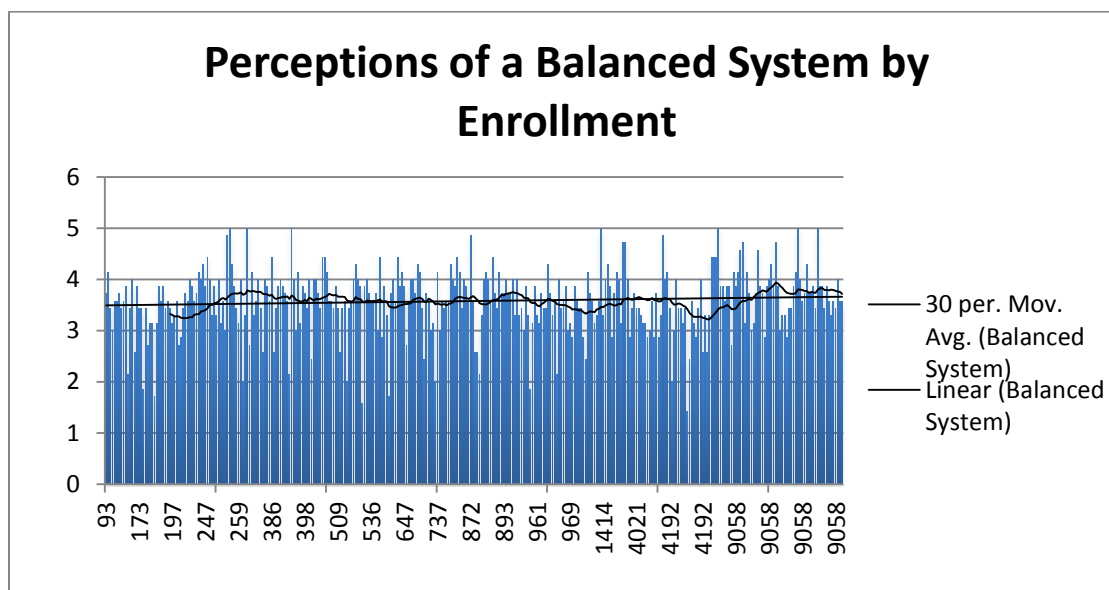


Figure 6. Perceptions of a balanced system by enrollment.

learning, school improvement and school accountability. While the results were varied, teachers were fairly consistent in their support of the concept of assessment. The gender of the teacher was determined to be significant ( $p < .05$ ) (see Table 13).

Table 13

*General Beliefs about Assessment*

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender*	1	84.256	7.714	.006	.023
Enrollment*	1	62.335	5.707	.017	.017
Error	329	10.922			

\*Significant at .05 level.

All teacher subgroups, regardless of gender, indicated that assessments were important. Female teachers indicated a higher confidence in the importance of

assessment, with an aggregate mean response of 4.18 on the five questions. However, the most common response for both males and females was “agree” (see Table 14).

Table 14

*Personal Beliefs about Assessment*

N=334	N	M	Mode	SD
Area				
Reading/Language Arts	82	4.06	4	.938
Mathematics	65	4.14	4	.681
Science	44	4.07	4	.698
Other	16	4.00	4	1.031
Multiple	127	4.20	4	.801
Gender*				
Male	73	3.93	4	.870
Female	261	4.18	4	.847
Level				
District	65	3.97	4	.891
Elementary	125	4.17	4	.822
Middle School	56	4.23	4	.661
Secondary School	88	4.12	4	.829
Curriculum Responsibilities				
Yes	54	4.21	4	.838
No	280	4.11	4	.698

\*Significant at .05 level.

***Comparison of STARS and NeSA.*** Nebraska schools were in the third year of transitioning from the locally developed STARS assessments to the statewide NeSA tests. Achieving an effective balance of the various tools, each with a different purpose,

becomes a philosophical decision that varies by district. To effectively compare STARS and NeSA in the areas of personal engagement, personal understanding and district improvement, we must first look at perceptions of STARS and NeSA independently.

**Perceptions of STARS.** The Nebraska STARS system was a bottom-up model wherein each local school district developed a set of assessments in the core curricular areas of Reading, Mathematics, and Science. District based assessment systems allowed districts to implement various strategies to administer the assessments ranging from point-of-instruction assessments repeated periodically, to a single test addressing multiple standards. Enrollment was the only effect determined to be significant ( $p < .05$ ) in an analysis of responses concerning STARS (see Table 15).

Table 15

*Perceptions of STARS*

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Enrollment*	1	715.470	4.788	.029	.014
Error	329	149.418			

\*Significant at .05 level.

The aggregate mean score of the 17 items addressing STARS was 3.67. The most common response for all respondents was “agree.” While differences were found based on the teacher area, gender, level of assignment, and curriculum responsibilities, these effects were not significant ( $p < .05$ ) (see Table 16).

Table 16

*Perceptions of Locally Developed Criterion Referenced Assessment Process (STARS)*

N=334	N	M	Mode	SD
<b>Role</b>				
Reading/Language Arts	82	3.75	4	1.131
Mathematics	65	3.63	4	.991
Science	44	3.61	4	.984
Other	16	3.41	4	1.016
Multiple	127	3.69	4	1.031
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	73	3.54	4	1.044
Female	261	3.71	4	1.042
<b>Level</b>				
District	65	3.58	4	1.044
Elementary	125	3.70	4	1.031
Middle School	56	3.76	4	1.064
Secondary School	88	3.63	4	1.046
<b>Curriculum Responsibilities</b>				
Yes	54	3.80	4	1.039
No	280	3.64	4	1.049

\*Significant at .05 level.

**Perceptions of NeSA.** Nebraska statute enacted in 2008 required that a single statewide test be phased in to replace the STARS system of locally developed assessments (NDE, 2010a, p. 1). The NeSA system used a multiple choice question format and was delivered in an on-line format to all schools. The effects found significant were building level of the teacher and their responsibilities with curriculum ( $p < .05$ ). Teaching area, gender, and enrollment were not significant (see Table 17).



Table 17

*Perceptions of NeSA*

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Level*	3	524.300	4.635	.003	.041
Curriculum*	1	827.149	7.312	.007	.022
Error	325	113.121			

\*Significant at .05 level.

Elementary teachers were the most positive about NeSA with an aggregate mean of 3.49 on the 17 items dealing with NeSA, while their counterparts at the secondary level were least positive at 3.13. Not surprisingly, teachers who indicated that they had curriculum responsibilities rated NeSA higher than those who did not (see Table 18).

***Personal engagement in STARS compared to engagement within the NeSA system.*** Nebraska teachers personal engagement within STARS and NeSA continued to vary during the transition between the two systems. For the purpose of this study, personal engagement is defined as being actively involved in the process and demonstrating an increase in understanding. All of the effects except gender were determined to be significant for the comparison of personal engagement in STARS and NeSA ( $p < .05$ ) (see Tables 19 and 20).

Teachers indicated a much higher level of engagement in the development of the assessments, evaluation of student progress, and the process of aligning curriculum with standards within the STARS system when compared to the NeSA state tests. On the other hand, teachers felt that NeSA was slightly more effective for evaluating student progress.

Table 18

*Perceptions of Nebraska's Statewide Assessment Tests (NeSA)*

N=334	N	M	Mode	SD
<b>Role</b>				
Reading/Language Arts	82	3.32	4	1.139
Mathematics	65	3.24	4	1.065
Science	44	3.13	4	.995
Other	16	3.15	4	1.057
Multiple	127	3.42	4	1.116
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	73	3.09	4	1.065
Female	261	3.37	4	1.088
<b>Level*</b>				
District	65	3.20	4	1.058
Elementary	125	3.49	4	1.120
Middle School	56	3.32	4	1.034
Secondary School	88	3.13	4	1.099
<b>Curriculum Responsibilities*</b>				
Yes	54	3.46	4	1.023
No	280	3.28	4	1.066

\*Significant at .05 level.

Table 19

*Between-Subjects Contrast of Personal Perceptions between STARS and NeSA*

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Area*	4	177.827	2.983	.019	.036
Level*	3	180.004	3.020	.030	.027
Curriculum*	1	667.528	11.199	.001	.034
Enrollment*	1	373.761	6.270	.013	.019
Error	321	59.607			

\*Significant at .05 level.

Table 20

*Within-Subjects Contrasts of Personal Perceptions between STARS and NeSA*

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Area*	4	17.204	.343	.849	.004
Level*	3	108.270	2.157	.093	.020
Curriculum*	1	21.012	.419	.518	.001
Enrollment	1	1051.379	20.950	.000	.061
Error	321	50.184			

\*Significant at .05 level.

The same teachers indicated that their personal understanding of the elements of assessment increased more during STARS than NeSA. The elements considered included instruction, assessment, using assessment data for planning, curriculum alignment, and the Nebraska Standards. It should be noted that STARS was implemented prior to NeSA and placed a high priority in staff development so the opportunity for improvement was greater (see Table 21).

Table 21

*Comparison between Personal Engagement in and Understanding of STARS and NeSA*

Role	Teachers	
	STARS	NeSA
Source		
Personal engagement in:		
1. development of assessments.	3.62	2.09
2. student preparation for assessments.	4.06	4.21
3. evaluating student progress using assessments.	4.10	3.60
4. collaboration to review results of assessments.	3.74	3.75
5. aligning curriculum with standards.	3.97	3.80
Personal understanding of:		
6. instruction.	3.37	2.96
7. assessment.	3.57	3.04
8. using assessment data for planning.	3.56	3.21
9. curriculum alignment.	3.74	3.25
10. Nebraska Standards.	3.86	3.40

***District's utilization of STARS system compared to the NeSA system.*** School districts employed different strategies in implementing the two assessment systems due to varying philosophies of assessment, different levels of expertise and background in assessment, and because of accessibility to financial resources. Teachers in districts that believed in assessment were highly committed to providing time for training, assessment development, and alignment of curriculum. Other districts, however, attempted to minimize the impact of assessment on instructional time. When comparing responses concerning district improvement in STARS and in NeSA, effects determined to be significant were gender and level ( $p < .05$ ) (see Tables 22 and 23).

Table 22

*Between-Subjects Contrasts of District Improvement between STARS and NeSA*

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender*	1	96.094	5.404	.021	.016
Level	3	45.464	2.557	.055	.023
Error	327	17.780			

\*Significant at .05 level.

Table 23

*Within-Subjects Contrasts of District Improvement between STARS and NeSA*

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender*	1	11.927	.958	.328	.003
Level*	3	16.183	1.299	.275	.012
Error	327	12.453			

\*Significant at .05 level.

Teachers indicated that district level improvement was more evident in STARS for all identified indicators. The indicators considered were instructional and assessment practices, use of assessment data for instructional planning, and aligning curriculum. While the timing of implementation of the two systems could also impact perceptions of district improvement, it would have little or no effect on the comparison on the perceived improvement of the student's overall performance identified in the final item of the comparison. The aggregate mean of district improvement items for STARS was 3.34, while only being 3.01 for NeSA (see Table 24).

Table 24

*Comparison between STARS and NeSA*

Role	Teachers	
	STARS	NeSA
Source		
District improved its:		
1. K-12 instructional practices.	3.44	3.23
2. K-12 assessment practices.	3.52	3.23
3. use of assessment data for instructional planning.	3.54	3.39
4. K-12 curriculum alignment process.	3.74	3.41
5. student's overall performance.	3.34	3.01

***Transition from the STARS system to the NeSA system.*** Nebraska schools were in the third year of transitioning from STARS to statewide NeSA tests. This transition represented a major change in assessment philosophy in the state driven by the state's executive and legislative branches as well as educators who were not satisfied with the STARS system. Once again, district strategies for the transition were varied and often depended upon the rigor of their existing assessment plan, the level of assessment expertise in the district, and willingness to prioritize time and financial resources. It was determined that teaching area and responsibilities with curriculum were significant ( $p < .05$ ) for the transition between the assessment systems (see Table 25).

Language arts teachers and teachers with multiple assignments were most confident in their district's process of transitioning from STARS to NeSA. Language arts teachers have been involved in NeSA much longer than their counterparts, as the NeSA reading test was the first to be implemented in Nebraska. In addition, language arts

Table 25

*Perceptions of Transition between STARS and NeSA*

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Area*	4	56.546	2.586	.037	.031
Curriculum*	1	132.460	6.058	.014	.018
Error	326	21.863			

\*Significant at .05 level.

teachers also had experience with statewide writing. Not surprisingly, science teachers who were just beginning the transition between systems are the least comfortable with the transition (see Table 26).

***Prevalence of a balanced assessment system.*** School districts have inherently different perspectives on assessment and on the need for a balanced assessment system. The perceived value of the various components of a balanced assessment system is critical in determining how each piece contributes to creating a school culture conducive to the effective use of achievement data. Districts were faced with decisions of how to balance the assessment tools: local assessment for instructional information, state tests for state comparison, and national tests for a national benchmark perspective (NDE, 2009, p. 2). Achieving an effective balance of the various assessment tools becomes a philosophical decision, which varies by district. Gender, curriculum responsibilities, and enrollment of the district were determined to be significant ( $p < .05$ ) when analyzing the prevalence of a balanced assessment system (see Table 27).

Table 26

*Perceptions of District's Transition from STARS to NeSA*

N=334	N	M	Mode	SD
<b>Area*</b>				
Reading/Language Arts	82	3.63	4	.966
Mathematics	65	3.48	4	.936
Science	44	3.43	4	.882
Other	16	3.51	4	.939
Multiple	127	3.63	4	.988
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	73	3.49	4	.911
Female	261	3.59	4	.972
<b>Level</b>				
District	65	3.56	4	.925
Elementary	125	3.60	4	.987
Middle School	56	3.55	4	1.010
Secondary School	88	3.55	4	.911
<b>Curriculum Responsibilities*</b>				
Yes	54	3.70	4	.933
No	280	3.55	4	.933

\*Significant at .05 level.



Table 27

*Prevalence of Balanced Assessment System*

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender*	1	153.268	8.608	.004	.026
Curriculum*	1	87.493	4.914	.027	.015
Enrollment*	1	102.949	5.782	.017	.017
Error	328	17.805			

\*Significant at .05 level.

Female teachers and those with responsibilities in curriculum were more confident in the prevalence of a balanced assessment system within their districts. The most common response for all respondents was “agree” (see Table 28).

Additional data was gathered in Phase II of this explanatory mixed-methods study to help the researchers further explore the survey respondent’s perceptions of assessments in the 3rd congressional district of Nebraska

### **Findings – Phase II Qualitative Data**

The qualitative phase of the explanatory mixed-method study was designed to provide further examination of results and assist in the explanation of the findings. The overarching research question was, “How do administrators and teachers describe their local district’s balanced assessment system, including local criterion-referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm-referenced test?” Sub-questions for the qualitative portion of the research included:

1. What is the purpose or purposes of assessment in Nebraska’s 3rd Congressional District?

2. What is the impact of STARS upon instruction and student learning in Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District? and
3. What is the impact of NeSA upon instruction and student learning in Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District?

Table 28

*Perceptions of the Prevalence of a Balanced Assessment System*

N=334	N	M	Mode	SD
<b>Role</b>				
Reading/Language Arts	82	3.63	4	.956
Mathematics	65	3.49	4	.885
Science	44	3.53	4	.817
Other	16	3.36	4	1.122
Multiple	127	3.63	4	.942
<b>Gender*</b>				
Male	73	3.39	4	.927
Female	261	3.63	4	.926
<b>Level</b>				
District	65	3.48	4	.902
Elementary	125	3.66	4	.939
Middle School	56	3.60	4	.919
Secondary School	88	3.52	4	.940
<b>Curriculum Responsibilities*</b>				
Yes	54	3.72	4	.936
No	280	3.55	4	.894

\*Significant at .05 level.

The results of the Phase I survey led the researchers to explore further qualitative data to provide understanding and insights into the educator's perceptions regarding these experiences by focusing on five different areas: (a) personal beliefs about assessment, (b) perceptions about the STARS system, (c) perceptions about the newly implemented Nebraska Statewide assessment tests (NeSA), (d) experiences with the transition from STARS to NeSA, and (e) progress towards a balanced assessment system. For purposes of this study, a balanced assessment system is defined as use of criterion-referenced assessments, NeSA test results, and national norm-referenced tests.

**Participants.** Qualitative data were collected in Phase II of the study through personal interviews with teachers who had given consent to be interviewed and who were selected by the researchers. Purposeful sampling was used to select interviewees, as two areas of the survey were of particular interest for the sampling based on the focus of the recently transitioned assessment system in the state: the participant's personal perceptions of STARS, his or her perceptions of NeSA, and the transition between the two, as that is the overall focus of this study. The selected teachers represented school districts of various sizes and demographic characteristics.

Table 29

*Phase II Interview Selection Matrix*

Improved by STARS (+)	Improved by STARS (+)
Not improved by NeSA (-)	Improved by NeSA (+)
Not improved by STARS (-)	Not improved by STARS (-)
Not improved by NeSA (-)	Improved by NeSA (+)

Additional qualitative data was gathered from interviews with four teachers. The four teachers represented districts with enrollments from approximately 200 to 9,000 students covering a wide geographic area, and a geographic area from Grand Island west to the panhandle of Nebraska, covering several hundred miles. Of the four teachers interviewed, three are currently elementary teachers with two having past experience at other age levels and district roles, and one was currently a middle grades teacher.

**Data collection procedures.** Two opportunities for collection of qualitative data were included in this study. First, an opportunity to respond to open ended questions was provided at the end of each section of the Phase I survey. A second opportunity to gather qualitative data was taken through personal interviews with representative survey respondents selected by the researchers using purposeful sampling.

While aggregate scores were calculated for each of the five sections of the survey, of particular interests was in teacher's responses to questions about personal perceptions of STARS and personal perceptions of NeSA. Teachers were selected for interviews based on these two response areas, selecting one from each quadrant as described earlier. Personal interviews with teachers were recorded and transcribed personally by the researcher or by a transcriptionist who had completed confidentiality training as required by the IRB.

**Data analysis procedures.** Data was organized, prepared for analysis, and then read as a whole in order to gain a general impression of what respondents were saying and how it related or did not related to the quantitative portion of the study. As the interview protocol was intentionally aligned with the Phase I survey, the primary themes identified through the qualitative analysis aligned accordingly. The strategy of aligning

the Phase II interview protocol with the Phase I survey paralleled the explanatory mixed methods design selected for the study. After review and reflection, five areas were determined to be the major themes for the qualitative portion of the study: (a) personal beliefs about assessment, (b) perceptions about the STARS system, (c) perceptions about the newly implemented Nebraska Statewide assessment tests (NeSA), (d) experiences with the transition from STARS to NeSA, and (e) progress towards a balanced assessment system. Further coding of the responses provided insight into general categories within each of the five themes of the study.

Qualitative research is subjective by nature and the researchers worked to validate their findings through the use of thorough and complete review of survey comments, field notes, and interview scripts, keeping in mind any personal biases that they may individually or collectively have. Both researchers in the parallel study have served in the teacher, principal, and superintendent role and both have also had extensive training in assessment and leadership through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and recognized assessment as an important part of providing quality education for students in all curricular areas and age groups. These perspectives, although related to the heart of the study, have been bracketed throughout the research process to ensure that they do not skew the perspective in reviewing and reporting study results (see Table 30).

***Theme 1: Perceptions and beliefs about assessment.*** The initial section of the Phase I survey focused on respondent's beliefs and perceptions about assessment in general. Upon review, responses revealed that overwhelmingly teachers believe assessment is a necessary and valuable tool to assist in providing meaningful instruction.

Table 30

*Themes for Qualitative Study*


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 Themes from interviews and open-ended items from survey.
 

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1. Personal perceptions about assessment.
  2. Perceptions of locally-developed, criterion-referenced, assessment process (STARS).
  3. Perceptions of standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced NeSA tests (NeSA).
  4. Perceptions of the transition from STARS to NeSA.
  5. Perceptions of the prevalence of a balanced assessment system with local school districts.
- 

It gives teachers the information they need to make good decisions about how instruction needs to change and adapt to the needs of the student. One teacher said,

I believe that formative assessments should guide and drive instruction. These formative assessments take many forms such as conferencing with students, checklists, small quizzes, etc. Summative assessments measure a student's growth in particular subjects. We need to be very careful about how we throw around the word 'assessment'. We need to be very distinctive about the two different kinds of school assessment.

Another said,

I use pre-assessments to determine what needs to be taught or is already known, formative, and summative assessments in every subject area. I believe if the students know in advance what it is they have to know at the end of each grade level and we set goals together to try to reach, then they take on the responsibility of learning those skills and strategies for problem solving.

It is clear through their comments that teachers feel assessment is an important part of the teaching and learning process, "I feel strongly that assessment is the opportunity for students to show what they know and what they can do. Hopefully, instruction has been tailored to help students do that." Yet another said, "The purpose of assessment is to help plan instruction, improve what the school offers and help with student learning . . . it gives feedback to students, teachers and parents." Perhaps more to the point,

It's everything . . . seeing where kids are at and figuring out what the next step is and where to go with them, how to help them understand even more and making sure that every kid understands on their level and can move to the next level.

Teachers' awareness of accountability and reporting was also abundantly clear through their comments regarding assessment in general. "I believe that assessment is a vital part of education. That being said, that doesn't mean that the accountability of a school should be tied strictly to assessments." Concern with how accountability results are obtained as well as time involved in assessment and accountability also surfaced. "I believe that assessment plays a part of school accountability but there are other factors that are just as important." One teacher says, "Assessment is one tool in a broader picture that defines a school. . . . Solely using assessment to measure school success leaves out many factors." Another said, "Assessment is extremely important within a school system, but I do not agree that a statewide assessment is at all important for comparing or ranking schools."

Another perspective on accountability was voiced by one of the teachers interviewed.

Teachers and schools are accountable for student results, but students seem to be left out of it . . . they don't see the impact . . . perhaps it needs to be a grade for kids or something . . . I don't know, but they are sort of the missing link. As accountability becomes more reported and the public becomes more aware, students need to become part of the picture.

The time spent with assessment rose as a concern for teachers.

Assessments are extremely important for all of the "parts" listed above. (Refers to five sections of the survey.) Unfortunately, assessment has gotten a bad reputation among some in education. Statewide accountability assessments occupy a great deal of time that has taken away the ability for teachers to explore fun and engaging topics. Or at least that is the perception of some teachers.

“Although assessment is an important part of school accountability, it is not the only factor and possibly not the most important factor. Academic assessment, in my opinion, should focus on a student growth model.” Another said, “Too much emphasis is placed on accountability of NeSA. Too much of a high stakes test.” Another agreed that time spent on assessments is a concern, “We have far too many assessments at this time.” “student’s sometimes are ‘over’ assessed.”

Assessment and its connection to school improvement efforts also surfaced. “Without student performance data provided through assessment, schools cannot make any decisions about how to improve their programs.” “Assessment results drive the decisions made for school improvement as well as instructional planning.”

A summarizing comment to portray the sense of teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about assessments follow: “Without assessment, it is impossible to understand what learning has occurred and the instructional decisions that need to be made to allow all students to master the material.” Overall, teachers understand and give voice to the importance of assessment in providing meaningful instruction and improving student learning.

***Theme 2: Perceptions of STARS.*** Eighty-one teachers responded to the open-ended question on the Phase I survey relating to STARS. These comments varied widely, with teachers having both positive and negative perceptions of the STARS process. “I appreciate the immediate feedback received with STARS assessment. Classroom teachers were able to remediate, reinstruct, and modify instruction as needed based on the timely feedback given in STARS system - very sorely missed in the current NeSA process.” Another said, “I really liked the STARS system and the kids performed well on



these tests.” Typically among the more positive comments towards STARS, student involvement in the assessment process was mentioned. “Local testing helps students assess what they are learning about.”

Other respondents were not so positive in reacting to STARS. “Sometimes I believe we spent too much time teaching to the assessments and students were missing out on many other learning opportunities.” Frustration with the development and revision process for some was expressed. “The STARS tests developed in our area were weak and poorly prepared. Even after given large amounts of feedback by several districts/teachers/team members, improvements were not made. The STARS test was treated as a joke.” There was concern for the long term prognosis of the STARS process,

There were often times when I felt that we were just spinning our wheels by creating all of the STARS assessments because I felt it was only a matter of time before we were forced to adopt standardized testing like every other state.

Teacher collaboration and professional learning were seen as positive outcomes. Curriculum alignment to standards and the impact on planning that took place in instruction were also seen positively. A fourth grade teacher in a small rural setting related that the best part about the STARS experience was the professional development that came from having a reason to get together to work on developing the assessments with other teachers in her same situation. She was incorporating assessments and curriculum revisions as a result of alignment in all areas and working hard to not lose sight of the student learning that was the reason for doing all of this.

There just isn't the same kind of opportunity or reason to talk about work together - there isn't a reason to get together anymore and our staff is so small it is hard to talk to anyone else about some of the testing because every grade and subject is different.

Another also found value in the collaborative experience that STARS had to offer.

I loved the STARS system. It gave all the educators ownership into the process. I also really liked the collaboration among educators. Working with educators each summer to evaluate the validity of test questions and create new test questions, really helped you, as an educator you could dig into your own personal curriculum while finding and learning new ideas from other educators.

There were those that had similar experiences and yet recognized that it was not the same for everyone.

We had many teachers who embraced the STARS assessment process and their students did show improvement, but we also had staff that did the bare minimum and STARS did not have an effect on their students. The teachers were still learning, but it wasn't because of STARS.

Another expressed similar frustration,

It was a large amount of time spent, some worthwhile but not now that it's been thrown out and a state test implemented, it is difficult not to be somewhat bitter and disappointed with the time and money spent in the past on the process. I am prepared to bypass the state test and just go to the national test. Nebraska students do very well and I am feeling burdened with the extra work now with no money or time to do the process again.

Curriculum work and planning for assessment were recurring topics that teachers shared comments about. "Curriculum alignment is always important in our schools, but we are still different and unique in our own special way. Curriculum has changed through the years because a teacher's favorite 'unit' to teach may not be necessary."

Another described how some of that change occurred.

With Stars we did sit down as a K-12 district and align our math standards so that we knew what grades covered all standards. . . . At high school level we got another teacher and made sure we had applied math 1 and 2 classes put in to reach all students. With new assessments, I feel like we are a little more disconnected again because of just the one time test.

The way districts approached curriculum review and alignment to the standards was not always done in a way teachers agreed with.

OK, STARS was a nightmare for me . . . the paperwork, most of the tests, reporting, finding cut scores took MAJOR time and effort from my work. Most

disappointing for me was the fact that we got together as a faculty on 1 or 2 occasions and we were completely unfocused in our curriculum alignment. Redoing a curriculum in 3 days is ridiculous . . . it should really take multiple meetings over the course of 1 or 2 years.

Accountability and comparison of schools surfaces as a concern in teacher comments.

The fact that scores were not comparable over the state makes them useful for only our district, and we're small enough that it was only one teacher. Therefore, I used them mostly for formative tests and eventually summative tests for state scores . . . not for student grades most of the time.

Another wasn't so sure about the value of STARS.

I think what a lot of teachers did was to develop a unit around a standard and they would teach to that standards . . . I do believe that since they were teaching to the test, I think that instruction was improved based on the fear that they would look bad if the student's didn't do well. Instruction was probably improved because of that, but not because of any data. . . this gets into that political area that kind of makes me cringe.

Professional development opportunities and learning about assessment and student learning that teachers experienced because of STARS was valuable for those that participated in the process. However, the workload that went along with building and maintaining the STARS system varied between districts in how they each dealt with curriculum and planning for assessment. In the end, STARS did not provide a way for the general public to be able to compare schools and was phased out in favor of a new system that would clearly allow comparison of districts.

***Theme 3: Perceptions of NeSA.*** There were 84 survey respondents that commented about their perceptions of NeSA. Responses were varied, with a wide range of thoughts about the overall value of NeSA as it relates to student learning and curriculum for students, teaching and learning for staff.

Student learning has many different components, but instruction is seen as a major contributor to student success. The information that teachers have access too from

NeSA testing was sometimes seen as valuable, but limited because of the unfamiliarity of teachers with the questions, and also because of what is seen in a delay of test results being returned to the teachers.

We're not familiar with the test questions well enough anymore. When we wrote them, we knew what was in there and had a pretty good idea if we had covered what we needed to cover or not. We knew the other (STARS) tests well enough that we got a lot of information from those. With NeSA, we don't have that.

This comment also demonstrates a sense of detachment from the assessment process when compared to STARS.

Another teacher relates,

It would be very beneficial to districts to have a breakdown of what types of questions were missed on each NeSA test so they know what areas they need to improve on. As of right now, the reporting seems to be rather vague with little significance to the district. The C4L project should greatly help with preparation but the state needs to step up their efforts in the reporting process.

There was another teacher that had a slightly different viewpoint.

The NeSA assessment seems to be more of a snapshot of what the students can do rather than what the STARS system revealed to us. We were able to pinpoint areas of weak teaching easier than with the STARS testing. I still comb through the results, but the NeSA is very cumulative so direct causes of low performance are not as easily seen.

The sense here being that NeSA tests do not help to inform instruction as much as teachers felt STARS did on a day-to-day basis.

The timeliness of teachers receiving NeSA results is seen as problematic, with reasons for that being described as both a state and local issue. "I wish we could have the feedback right away to see how the kids did on the test." Another teacher shared,

the results are so slow coming to us that we don't have time to use it. We don't know how the kids did before they move on (to the next grade). This is the first year that we were given the 5th grade data, but the way that it was given to us – it was all the data from all the schools, so it takes a lot of time to go through every

student in every elementary to find our students to figure it out, so it's a little bit of a challenge to use that data.

Another teacher summarized the sentiments of those who had concerns with the timing of feedback being available compared to STARS,

NeSA is frustrating in that, there is no immediate feedback, especially for students. It seems that the accountability is heavy on the staff and school, and not much on the individual student. It is difficult to motivate a student to do their best without immediate feedback or consequence involved.

Even with concerns about timing of receiving results, some see benefit in NeSA, "I'm grateful for a statewide test for continuity and for comparing data over time." There is recognition of the continuity across the state that NeSA testing provides, "I like the NeSA assessment process with regards to all students across state being assessed on the same standards and so districts can't skew their data by adjusting assessments or cut scores." Another teacher takes a more global approach to the value of NeSA, "I believe the NeSA will help our district prepare our students for future challenges by identifying what concepts students understand and what needs further development."

Teaching and learning for staff appears to rely on the past STARS system, "much of that improvement and understanding of teaching practices, assessment practices, and alignment had been made during the STARS process since it came before NESAS."

Another elaborated on reactions to the professional development that came about with STARS compared to NeSA:

Oh my goodness! STARS was tremendous at increasing my personal understanding about instruction and assessment. NeSA has done nothing to help with it and for planning my daily instruction. I have no idea what my kids are doing well on or what they need improvement in. With STARS, I knew exactly what my kids were missing and what I needed to improve on.

Overall most teachers felt their involvement in developing the STARS assessments was helpful in the classroom because it grew their understanding of assessment and their ability to adjust instruction based on the data that assessment gave them.

The overall sense of NeSA is that it provides some information towards meaningful instruction, but that it is really more about accountability and comparisons than the previous STARS system was, “The NeSA test is a one time, high stakes test. It shows student performance on one given day.” There is concern from another that the focus on assessment results, such as NeSA, has changed instruction,

I think NeSA makes things easier for teachers as far as not having to test so many separate times and the focus can be more on teaching, but I don't think it's fair that this one test has such a great burden on our school as far as AYP goes.

But like most systems, as teachers experience change with the transition in assessment systems in Nebraska, there were differing viewpoints. “I know a lot of teachers grumble about the NeSA tests, but I personally like them. It shows me as a teacher where my students need more instruction and where my teaching weaknesses are.” And some are willing to see the more global view of assessment, “I do not believe that the implementation of NeSA changed the way our district does business. We continue to strive for excellence and teach using best practices. We strive to improve student learning and instructional planning.”

In the end, perhaps the overall perceptions of NeSA can be summarized as follows:

I don't feel that any assessment will improve a teacher's instructional practices. It has to come from within and it takes time and money for a district to help their teachers improve instruction practices. The test does give you direction as to where you want your students to be.

For some, NeSA is seen as a way to improve instruction not necessarily in the way that STARS did. For others, it is seen as merely a comparison tool and a means of reporting to the public about a district.

***Theme 4: Perceptions of the transition to NeSA from STARS.*** Transition by its nature is a force to be reckoned with, takes time and persistence to deal with, and ultimately is a winding path to a balanced combination of the past and the present. There were 52 teacher respondents to the open-ended question as part of the Phase I survey. After review of the comments; it appeared there was a sense of resignation to NeSA testing and what it had to offer. One respondent said, “The emphasis on individual students was the strength of the STARS system. The NeSA is more of a glancing view at a group of students where the district is really in the crosshairs and not the student.” Another suggests that the transition was more about who was involved in preparing for the testing:

There really wasn't much transition or training. The state just told you how it was going to be and you just had to do it . . . administrators got the training and information and brought it back to us. In STARS, the teachers got the training and information and then implemented everything.

Some take a more global stance: “Our district has placed emphasis on achievement, curriculum, assessment and accountability throughout my tenure with both STARS and NeSA. The only shift was the sort of test given.”

Teacher interviews revealed that in some cases, transition was described in a more drastic fashion, “It was literally like August when most of us heard about the ‘new’ statewide mandated test and were thrown in the fire. I felt very unprepared and still do in many ways.” Another teacher pointed to concern experienced by small districts when enrollment becomes an uncontrollable factor, “Due to the ‘RANKING’ our emphasis has

changed. It is difficult in smaller schools. . . . With smaller numbers, one student can make a big difference in percentage changes.” Another teacher’s comment stressed the variation from district to district,

During the STARS assessment I was teaching in a different district and they provided no training or assistance or even a chance to look at scores so I could use them to improve. During the NeSA assessment I have transitioned to a different district and they have provided a lot of training and support.

Together these comments give a sense of the broad range of experiences districts and their teachers have in dealing with change.

Overall the transition from STARS to NeSA was something that happened and for most respondents, the change from one system to another was not as drastic as some would portray. Past experience and training as part of the STARS process made the transition possible; “We had worked a great deal to align the curriculum during the STARS process so that our transition to NeSA was fairly smooth at least at my grade level because we had been doing STARS for many years.” Even with changes, the commitment to instruction to meet the expectation was apparent. “We were doing everything we could to make students successful during the STARS assessments. Our curriculum was aligned and we all continue to teach our curriculum to the standards as we did before.”

Others exhibit a more philosophical outlook on NeSA implementation and leaving STARS behind. “We value high standards and performance and the change in testing does not affect how we evaluate our staff or students. It just changed one of the tools in the toolbox.” Comments like these related to state and federal accountability and reporting and the realization that in some way, everyone desired to be seen as successful



so they adjust to meet the new guidelines. In the end, they struggled and changed to fit the pieces of assessment into a completed puzzle.

***Theme 5: Perceptions of a balanced assessment system.*** Forty-eight teachers offered comments in the section of the Phase I survey regarding the existence of a balanced assessment system within their district. These comments were reviewed along with interviewee responses. Considered as a whole, they portrayed a sense of uncertainty and recognition that movement towards a balanced system of assessment is a worthy cause, noting that one style or type of assessment does not portray the picture as well as a combination of assessments does. However, most indicated that assessments were in place, but the balance may be harder to find as emphasis tend to be on one kind of testing or another and the reasons for the testing are somewhat undefined.

My school district is greatly lacking a balanced assessment system. Teachers and administrators in my building do not understand the importance in it. My school district made the choice to not to participate in the C4L training. I feel this will be a great loss to our district.

Yet another teacher reflected a completely different tone present in their district, “My district is almost obsessed with the balanced assessment process. It seems to be all we talk about in our professional development. I know that it is very beneficial and necessary for school improvement and student learning.” Another kept the student as the focus, “I feel all students deserve to take a variety of tests. Tests that are given at grade level as well as tests that are given at a student's learning level.” Finding the balance is the struggle as one teacher stated,

Right now they've described it as a teeter-totter with a balanced scale. Our goal this year is to get our curriculum aligned and get some assessment consistency. It's an area of need right now. We were told we were over assessing and so we scaled back, and now we don't have enough assessments. We're trying to find a happy medium, but it's definitely been a goal.

The question of how much is enough or too much was also common among respondents and interviews. Teachers indicated there were a lot of things in place such as Dibels testing or use of assessments from the STARS era to help prepare students for NeSA testing. Accountability and the reality of the public reporting and ranking was on teacher's minds. Teacher's comments indicated an understanding of a balanced assessment system and the benefits of that kind of coordinated system, but they also recognized the pressures that are in play such as public reporting and how to arrive at the best outcomes. As one teacher said,

I understand that we're hoping to have a balanced assessment system here, but mostly, what we do is test kids. They take at least two NeSA-R practices prior to the actual test, at least one NeSA-W practice before the state test, two Acuity tests designed to measure their aptitude for the NeSA-R test, three SRI tests designed to assess their instructional reading level and possibly place them in to reading intervention classes, 1 norm-referenced test, and 2 textbook-manufactured tests per unit for a total of 5 units. My 8th grade students take 21 tests over the course of the year, and that doesn't include the common formative assessments within each unit.

Another said, "I think it is critical to have a balanced approach. It is the cumulative picture that tells how a child is doing over time. Every child can have a bad day, but if a child is doing poorly over and over again, this will show up on a variety of tests."

The public picture of the story that assessment and testing tells needs to be tempered:

We have a small student population so statistically our results change so much from year to year that it is hard to get data to really show strength any weakness, or to be used as a tool for professional accountability. Longitudinally we can see trends, but we don't have enough NeSA data to do true longitudinal studies yet.

Even with the concerns over each district's specifics of size or demographics, teacher's comments indicate an understanding of a balanced assessment system and the benefits of that kind of coordinated system, but the struggle to arrive at that balanced system is still

apparent, “I want assessment to be a part of the curriculum, I do not want testing to be the main reason for instruction.”

**Summary.** The overarching Phase II qualitative research question for this study was, “How do administrators and teachers describe their local district’s balanced assessment system including local criterion referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm referenced tests? The first sub-question for the qualitative portion of this parallel study was, (1) “What is the purpose of assessment in Nebraska’s 3rd district?” Overwhelmingly, teachers felt assessment is an important component of providing a quality instruction. Assessment allowed teachers and students alike to see strengths and weaknesses of the teaching and learning process. It had the ability to guide instruction so that it matches the needs of students when relating to the approved or accepted standards and curriculum. Simply stated, “I believe assessment is an important tool to help understand our students and what they need from their educators.”

The second research sub-question was, (2) “What is the impact of STARS upon instruction and student learning in Nebraska’s 3rd Congressional District?” STARS was a system that impacted instruction in that it gave Nebraska educators the flexibility within the framework of Nebraska content area standards to determine their own fate in many ways. In the STARS process, local educators had considerable control of the process and STARS expected and allowed assessments to be built by the teachers. These teachers grew to understand the power of assessment for their individual classrooms and their students through their instruction. “STARS was developed by the staff and school and was very hands on education with immediate feedback that was so helpful to both the staff, school, and students.” Most teachers that had been involved in the development

and implementation of the STARS process believed that it did have a positive impact on instruction and learning as they knew more about what students knew and didn't know so were able to adjust instruction to meet the needs of the student. Student learning based on the defined standards allowed improved opportunity to learn because teachers, and very likely students, knew what the target was through standards, curriculum, and instruction alignment. "The STARS system allowed me to develop assessments that matched the standards, and fit our district's curriculum. I was able to test, re-teach, and then re-test to make sure students gained proficiency."

The third and final research sub-question was, (3) What is the impact of NeSA upon instruction and student learning in Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District?" NeSA built on some of the components of the STARS system such as using Nebraska educators to assist in the writing of the test items, although teachers were not as involved in the NeSA test development as they had been with the STARS process. The scaled back teacher involvement of NeSA has seemingly led to a sense of detachment from the NeSA tests as several responses indicated their feelings that the NeSA test was more about rank ordering schools than it was about informing instruction. "It's all about test scores for everyone and everywhere." Frustration about the data that is returned from NeSA testing was expressed, "NeSA thus far has not provided timely, usable data."

Others recognized the benefit of a common test because it provided a way to see how local students perform when compared to other schools and students across the state. One teacher summarized, "I think it more consistent because it's the same across the state." Another says, "The NeSA tests are well designed and seem to do a reasonable

good job assessing student performance. They did help us a great deal in the area of curriculum alignment.”

Perceptions of the ability of the NeSA test to provide information about instruction were mixed. Some teachers indicated it was helpful, while others indicated that it was not and expressed concern over the delay and more generalized information that was available at its conclusion. Alignment of standards and curriculum is one important pre-requisite to general assessment. For some, NeSA has helped with that process; “Our district will be making revisions to our curriculum and practices since the NeSA test was implemented.” Knowing the target impacts the outcome of student learning.

Another thread throughout the comments was the importance of using appropriate and varied types of assessment. As defined by NDE, a balanced assessment system laid out a template for districts looking to develop and implement a system. This included the use of a norm-referenced test, criterion referenced tests, and NeSA testing. Teacher’s comments indicated that the components of a balanced assessment system were in place in their districts. However, there was reservation about whether a balanced system was developed to the degree it needed to be to be valuable, and therefore questioned whether it was getting at the intended purpose of impacting student learning. One teacher commented, “We give some local criterion-referenced assessments, the NeSA tests, and national norm-referenced tests, but I wouldn't say that we utilize that data to its potential to provide desired results. I wouldn't say that we use them in an effective balance either.” Assessments impact on instruction and student learning will continue to change and

improve with the development and implementation of balanced assessments systems, complete with data review skills

Even with all of the concerns that were voiced, there was recognition that a balanced system of assessment has value. One teacher says, “A balanced system gives the district information about how well the state standards are being taught and how well the students are learning.” Another teacher addressed the question from a more philosophical standpoint;

It is our dream to be the best rural district in the US, in order to accomplish this we are currently intensely designing a comprehensive curriculum which with entail the following, scope/sequence, pacing guides, curriculum detail, best practices, interventions, and of course, assessments. This will be a complete and comprehensive program that will include state, national and district testing and will align to state standards as well as core standards.

Overall, the idea of a balanced system is something that schools appear to be striving for. Together, NeSA, local criterion referenced testing, and norm referenced testing will have an impact on teaching and learning for staff and students alike. To summarize, “Assessment should be used for planning instruction” (see Table 31).

Table 31

*Themes and Codes - Teachers*


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Themes and Codes from interviews and open-ended items from survey.

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1. Personal perceptions about assessment.	
a. informed instruction	22
b. student learning	18
c. accountability	16
d. number of assessments	11
e. time needed for assessments	4
f. used for school improvement	2
2. Perceptions of locally-developed, criterion-referenced, assessment process (STARS).	
a. teaching and learning	21
b. curriculum	15
c. alignment and planning	11
d. development and collaboration	10
3. Perceptions of standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced NeSA tests (NeSA).	
a. use of data	18
b. instruction	21
c. administration and use of technology	18
a. development	10
4. Perceptions of the transition from STARS to NeSA.	
a. accountability	21
b. professional involvement	14
c. curriculum	14
5. Perceptions of the prevalence of a balanced assessment system with local school districts.	
a. accountability	23
b. components of a balanced assessment system	22

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## Chapter 5

### Summary, Discussion and Recommendations

#### Summary

The overarching research question “How do teachers describe their local district’s balanced assessment system including local criterion referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm referenced test?” framed this study. Quantitative data were collected in Phase I using a web-based survey of study participant’s perceptions about assessments in general, the Nebraska STARS assessment system, the NeSA assessment system, the transition from STARS to NeSA and the perceived prevalence of a balanced assessment system. A collection of qualitative data occurred in open-ended questions included within the Phase 1 survey and from an analysis of interviews completed in Phase II of the study. The researcher selected an explanatory mixed-methods model to more deeply explore and explain the findings from the study.

This study on perceptions of teachers was conducted in conjunction with a parallel study of administrators’ perceptions completed by Michael Teahon. A comparison between the two groups of educators is provided in the final chapter to expand the breadth of the study.

The population of the parallel studies included educators from across the 3rd Congressional District of Nebraska. Superintendents recommended administrators and teachers from 92 of the 166 school districts located within this area and the survey was completed by approximately 28% of the 1,621 educators who were sent the survey. Of a potential 1,344 teachers, 334 submitted the survey. In addition, various effects were applied to the aggregate means and tested for significance. The effects included teaching



area, gender, building level, curriculum responsibilities, and district enrollment. It was determined that significance varied by effect and this was noted within the analysis.

While significance varied by effect throughout the study, differences were noticed in overall perceptions by subgroups throughout the study. The overall mean scores for all subgroups were very similar, with language arts teachers scoring highest overall. All teacher subgroups indicated confidence in assessment in general, with all subgroups scoring STARS higher than NeSA. Female teachers were more positive than their male counterparts. Teachers with curriculum responsibilities were only slightly more positive than those without formal curriculum responsibilities. Scores for the transition from STARS to NeSA and for the district's use of a balanced assessment system fell midway between neutral and agree. Language arts teachers were more confident than their peers in the prevalence of a balanced assessment system within their district. Finally, teachers' general beliefs in assessment, their confidence in the transition from STARS to NeSA, and perceptions of a balanced assessment system increased as district enrollment increased. Interestingly, perceptions of STARS decreased as district enrollment increased and perceptions of NeSA increased as the district enrollment increased.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study are organized around an evolving assessment system in Nebraska as it transitions from the locally developed STARS system to a statewide test. The explanatory mixed-methods model selected for the study was sequential in nature as perceptions were analyzed in the Phase I quantitative portion of the study and then explained in the follow up qualitative phase. As the interview protocol was intentionally aligned with the Phase I survey, the primary themes identified through the qualitative

analysis aligned accordingly. The five themes included (1) perceptions of assessment, (2) personal engagement, and (3) district improvement resulting from STARS and NeSA, (4) perceptions of the transition between the two systems, and (5) perceptions on the prevalence of a balanced assessment system within the local district.

The first quantitative research question asked, “Do teachers’ perceptions differ on the value of assessment and its impact on student learning?” Teachers were very consistent in their perception of the importance of assessment with an overall mean score of 4.00. Teachers in all subgroups scored STARS higher than NeSA and overall, responded favorably to the concept of assessment.

Gender of teachers was discovered as being significant, with female teachers having higher confidence in assessment than males, even though the most common response regardless of gender was “agree.” Elementary and middle level teachers were found to be generally more positive about assessment than other subgroups except for the transition from STARS to NeSA.

Through both the quantitative and qualitative data, assessment is seen as an integral piece of providing quality instruction and is seen as having an impact on student learning, “I believe assessment is a good tool to help teachers check to see if the students are gaining and obtaining any knowledge.” In response to the first qualitative research question, “What is the purpose or purposes of assessment in Nebraska’s 3rd Congressional District?” one teacher summarized for the group, “I believe teachers are constantly assessing their students to better serve them in their education.” Using the words of another teacher, again the purpose of assessment is understood, “Assessments drive instruction, as well as give a picture of a student's progress along the continuum of

achievement.” Together these comments explain the passion that most teachers feel about the purpose and value of assessment in the classroom.

The second quantitative research questions focused on personal engagement and district improvement resulting from STARS and from NeSA, “Do teacher’s perceptions differ on their personal engagement in the locally developed, classroom based, criterion-referenced assessment system with STARS compared to their engagement in standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced testing within the NeSA system?” Prior to reporting on the comparison between the two, the researcher reported on perceptions of the two systems independently. While perceptions of STARS are well established, it should be noted that perceptions of NeSA were still being formed as it was newly implemented.

The teachers’ overall aggregate mean score of items related to STARS was relatively strong at 3.67. The only effect with a significant difference was enrollment. When responding to items involving STARS, the subgroup of language arts teachers were somewhat more positive than their counterparts and those with curriculum responsibilities were most positive of all subgroups.

Teacher perceptions about the impact of STARS were elaborated through teachers’ comments regarding the value of some of the things that came with STARS, such as the opportunity for professional development and the importance of curriculum alignment with recognized standards. Answering the second qualitative question, “What is the impact of STARS upon instruction and student learning in Nebraska’s 3rd Congressional District?” one teacher explained, “I thought it had good impact and now because of what I learned, I have more impact. It helped with what we were going to do

and what direction we were going to go.” She described the strength of STARS as, “It was teacher created and teachers became experts in the classroom, knowing what they’re looking for and what we needed to do for the kids to see how they were progressing.” Regular curriculum review became the norm for some with the STARS process, “We updated the curriculum as we worked through the different areas like Language Arts and Math . . . pretty much as the standards have changed we have done that.”

When thinking about the qualitative sub-questions, impact of STARS on instruction and student learning, it is apparent that most teachers felt that the staff development that was an integral part of the STARS process made them better teachers because they learned from their peers and learned from the experts about what assessment for the purpose of student learning looked like. They also learned the importance of curriculum alignment with standards as it gave common direction for staff and students alike.

Teachers’ overall perception of NeSA was not as positive as it was for STARS with an aggregate mean score of only 3.31. The difference in respondents’ responsibilities as curriculum coordinator was a significant effect for NeSA items along with building level. Those with curriculum responsibilities were more positive than those who did not have them. In addition, elementary teachers were significantly more positive than other teachers concerning NeSA. The elementary teachers mean score for NeSA was 3.49 compared to the district level aggregate of 3.20.

This perception was supported by qualitative comments that suggested that NeSA has value, but perhaps not the impact on instruction and student learning that some teachers felt STARS did, “STARS was tremendous at increasing my personal

understanding about instruction and assessment, but NeSA has done nothing to help with it and for planning my daily instruction.” There is recognition that the sequence of the systems may have had some impact on teachers’ perceptions about them, “Because STARS came first, my personal experiences with curriculum alignment, assessments, and student performance did not improve by implementing a NEW assessment system. Had NeSA come first my answers for the two systems would have been reversed.” There are also those that feel that NeSA has simplified the assessment process, “I’m grateful for a statewide test for continuity and for comparing data over time.”

Independent analysis of STARS and NeSA guided the research of the second qualitative research question which asked, “Do teachers’ perceptions differ on their personal engagement in the locally developed, classroom-based, criterion-referenced assessment system within STARS compared to their engagement in standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced testing within the NESA system?” Personal engagement was defined as being actively involved in the assessment process and demonstrating an improvement in understanding. All of the effects except gender were determined to be significant for comparison of personal engagement in STARS and NeSA. The greatest area of difference in personal engagement between STARS and NeSA was in the sub-theme of development of assessments with the aggregate mean score for STARS being 3.62 and for NeSA being 2.09 (Table 21). Qualitative data supported the idea that personal engagement had an impact on both systems. Teacher involvement played a role in the perceptions teachers have about the impact of NeSA on student learning and instruction, “STARS was fantastic professional development. . . . There isn’t the same kind of opportunity or reason to talk work together anymore with NeSA.”

The third qualitative sub-question, “Do teachers’ perceptions differ on their district’s transition from the locally developed, classroom-based, criterion-referenced assessments within the STARS system, compared to the standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced test within the NeSA system?” considers the impact of NeSA on instruction and student learning. Teacher perceptions of NeSA were sometimes of a more practical nature in that they commented on the use of NeSA data and some of the challenges that they face in making that data part of meaningful instruction. As one described data available from NeSA, “NeSA thus far has not provided timely, usable data. We do not know what a student's weak areas are, as assessed in this system, until the beginning of the next school year.” Another teacher described concerns with technology and scheduling,

The other thing I find frustrating is the fact that it is all on-line and when you’re in a school that’s limited on computers, it’s very hard to make sure that everyone gets to do the test. We’re also dealing with scheduling conflicts because it’s not timed. We don’t want them to feel rushed, at the same time, that has an effect on all the other classes going on.

However, there are those that did find value in the NeSA process and some liked the continuity of testing across the state as it gives them a mark to look at to know if things are moving along as they should be, “The NeSA tests are well designed and seem to do a reasonably good job assessing student performance.” There were mixed reviews as NeSA was still relatively new, with STARS not far enough in the past to be forgotten.

The independent analysis of STARS and NeSA also directed researchers to the third qualitative research question, which focused on district improvement. Gender and level were significant effects for perceptions of district improvement.

Teachers' aggregate mean scores in the area of district improvement were higher for STARS than NeSA in all improvement indicators including instructional practices, assessment practices, use of assessment for instructional planning, the curriculum alignment process, and in improvement of student's overall performance. While the timing of implementation of the two systems could also impact perceptions of district improvement, it would have little or no effect on the comparison on the perceived improvement of the student's overall performance identified in the final item of the comparison.

The fourth research question asked, "Do teachers' perceptions differ on their district's transition from the locally developed classroom-based, criterion referenced assessment within the STARS system compared to the standardized, statewide, criterion referenced test within the NeSA system?" Both teaching area and curriculum responsibilities were significant for perceptions of the transition process. Being on the front lines of the transition between assessment systems, it was not surprising that those with curriculum responsibilities were significantly more confident than those without curriculum responsibilities. Language arts teachers were more confident in the transition from STARS to NeSA than their counterparts in other sub-groups. It is worth noting that language arts teachers had dealt with state assessment longer than other sub-groups as they were the first to experience assessment with a state perspective.

When considering the transition from STARS to NeSA and the impact that has had on instruction and student learning—for some, it is about finding the balance of what that process looks like within their district, "We were told we were over assessing and we

cut back, so now we are trying to find the happy medium spot.” Another says when asked if anyone explained to them how the transition was going to work,

Yes, they talked about it would be changing and what it would look like. It was really pretty easy because I have been involved in both, so I’ve seen how it started and what it looked like and what it progressed into. I really don’t think anyone has said a lot.

In reacting to the transition, it appears that most educators have taken the transition in stride, still thinking about the impact on instruction and learning, but yet wondering about how to deal with the new system and their perception of what it can or can’t provide for teaching and learning.

The final quantitative research question asked, “Do administrators’ perceptions differ on the prevalence of a balanced assessment system within their school district?” Significant effects were found for gender, curriculum responsibilities, and district enrollment on the perception of a balanced assessment system within local districts. Those with curriculum responsibilities were more confident of the existence of a balanced assessment system than those without, and females were more confident than males. The regression coefficient for the enrollment effect indicated that as the enrollment increases, the perception of a balanced assessment system also increases.

In the teacher qualitative comments, balanced assessment surfaced as something that most had at least heard of, but overall seemed to be unsure of how their district dealt with all of the components and how the components worked together, “We have one, but we do not always appear to evaluate the results well. I have personally never seen the results of the national tests.” Another says, “I don't even know what a balanced assessment system might look like unless you are talking about triangulation of data for school improvement.” The value of a balanced assessment system is another area that



teachers' were uncertain about, "Assessment is done to meet requirements, it's not uniform and is rarely used to change teaching practices or increase student achievement."

And yet there are those that understand but recognize growth is still needed:

I feel we have a moderately balanced system of assessment tools in which to measure consistent student progress. However, I don't feel teachers are given the time to evaluate all the data pieces and determine where weaknesses are and how improvements could be made for the betterment of all involved.

### **Recommendations**

To address the overarching question of this study, "How do teachers describe their district's balanced assessment system including local criterion referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm referenced test?" Teachers believe in the general value of assessment. However, they were unsure about the value of a balanced system of assessment and were unclear about what that is and how it existed in their district. The concept of various types of assessments working together as a balanced system generally wasn't present with focus appearing to be more on one piece or another of an assessment system. Finally, the use of the information that is available from the different types of assessment and using that data together was another area that most were uncertain about. With these things in mind, the researcher makes the following recommendations based on her view of the data that was collected through this study:

**Recommendation one.** Local districts working with supporting agencies such as ESU's and NDE should continue staff development efforts relating to the components of balanced assessment and building understanding and ability to implement the various components. This would include first building a common knowledge base of what those components are for the local district and at a minimum understanding a balanced assessment system as it is defined by NDE. This means defining what is in place in the

district and determining how information from the various sources can, should, and will be used to benefit instruction and thereby benefit student learning. For some districts there is a wealth of data already available, but the process of coordinating and making that information available and useful for teachers is another very important aspect of building a balanced assessment system.

**Recommendation two.** District leaders and teacher leaders need to understand the change process and support teachers through the process of change from the STARS accountability system to the NeSA system. Teachers need support in the journey to build the expectation and utilization of a balanced assessment system. This requires leadership that understands change and how it impacts teachers' opinions and actions. Leaders also need training and support in guiding their districts in developing that system. It is also important the leaders understand the value and benefits that a balanced assessment system has to offer in what it can provide for instructional decisions. It is essential that district leaders' and teacher leaders' work together to build that common vision for what a balanced assessment system is and what it looks like for them. This is the first step to moving on that road together – understanding where they are going together as a district or even a building and knowing their piece of the puzzle.

**Recommendation three.** Further development of a curriculum alignment process should be sought to be sure that review and alignment is happening in all curricular areas. Again, leaders and teachers need to work together towards defining what that looks like for the district. Curriculum alignment is something that can be defined and controlled within a district so it is important to build a process that recognizes and utilizes the power that the assessment process gives teachers and leaders rather than the limitations it may

impose. Again, leaders who understand the change and transition process are better able to help teachers move past the initial frustration of change and into a position of being poised for positive actions.

**Recommendation four.** Further study of Nebraska schools that define themselves as being successful with a balanced assessment system can help build a stable of model practices that can be used as a roadmap for other districts, understanding the background of assessment in Nebraska as well as the current picture.

**Recommendation five.** Further study of leaders and teachers in Nebraska that define themselves as being successful with using data from a balanced system could help to build a base of model practices that can be used as a guide for other educators. This increased understanding the role and impact of leadership at both the administrative and teacher levels its effect on implementation could help other districts in the development of a balanced assessment system.

## Chapter 6

### Comparison of Administrators' and Teachers' Perceptions

#### Purpose

The purpose of the parallel explanatory mixed-methods studies completed by Michael Teahon and Jamie Isom was to explore the perceptions of Nebraska administrators and Nebraska teachers about experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA as well as their perceptions of the influence of that shift in implementing a balanced assessment system. The structure of the parallel studies was identical with the only difference being within the sample considered. Results, discussion, and recommendations within the “administrator” study dealt exclusively with responses and comments from superintendents, principals, and other administrators. Conversely, only responses and comments from teachers were discussed in the “teacher” study. Teachers of language arts/reading, mathematics, science, assigned to multiple areas or designated as “other” were included within the sample. The results from the 115 administrators and 334 teachers will be compared within this report.

#### Research Questions

The primary research question that guided this study was “How do administrators and teachers describe their district’s balanced assessment system including local criterion-referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national-norm-referenced tests?”

Five research questions frame the collection and analysis of data within the Phase I quantitative portion of the study. They include:

1. Do administrators' and teachers' perceptions differ on the value of assessment and its impact on student learning?
2. Do administrators' and teachers' perceptions differ on their personal engagement in the locally developed, classroom-based, criterion-referenced assessment system within STARS compared to their engagement in standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced testing within the NeSA system?
3. Do administrators' and teachers' perceptions differ on their district's utilization of locally developed, classroom-based, criterion-referenced assessments within the STARS system compared to the standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced testing within the NeSA system?
4. Do administrators' and teachers' perceptions differ on their district's transition from the locally developed, classroom-based, criterion-referenced assessments within the STARS system compared to the standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced test within the NeSA system?
5. Do administrators' and teachers' perceptions differ on the prevalence of a balanced assessment system within their school district?

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The researchers selected an explanatory mixed-methods approach for this study. Quantitative data were collected in the initial phase (Phase I) of the study using a survey of administrators' and teachers' perceptions about assessments in general, the Nebraska STARS assessment system, the NeSA assessment system, the transition from STARS to NeSA, and the prevalence of a balanced assessment system. The collection of quantitative data was followed with the collection of qualitative data in the second phase

(Phase II) of the study for the purpose of assisting in the explanation and interpretation of the findings. The survey was initially piloted with Nebraska educators serving in districts outside of Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District prior to being administered to the selected sample.

Educators from 92 public school districts from within Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District were surveyed using a survey developed by the researchers from a review of the literature and organized around the five research questions. An open-ended qualitative question was included at the end of each survey section and was used to frame interview questions for the qualitative second phase (Phase II) of the study.

### **Participants**

The survey population for the parallel studies consisted of administrators and teachers in 166 public school districts within Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District. Contact information for 1,621 educators was submitted by 92 of the 162 school districts. The potential respondents, including 277 administrators and 1,344 teachers, received an email containing an individualized link to the survey with 449 completing the survey (27.7% of potential participants) (see Table 32).

Table 32

#### *Response Rate*

Source	Sample	Respondents	%
Administrators	277	115	41.5
Teachers	1,344	334	24.9
Total	1,621	449	27.7

The focus of this combined comparison will be between those serving as an administrator (115) and those serving as a teacher (334). Gender, level, enrollment, and curriculum responsibility were analyzed within the parallel studies but are not part of the focus for the combined comparison (see Table 33).

Table 33

*Sample for Parallel Studies*

Source	Respondents	%
Administrators	115	
Superintendent	41	36
Principal	63	55
Other	11	10
Teachers	334	
Reading/Language Arts	82	25
Mathematics	65	19
Science	44	13
Other	16	5
Multiple Areas	127	38

**Findings – Phase I Quantitative Data**

The findings of the combined Phase I quantitative study are organized around the five research questions that addressed these areas: (a) the value of assessment and its impact on student learning, (b) personal engagement with STARS compared to NeSA, (c) the district’s utilization of STARS compared to NeSA, (d) transition from STARS to NeSA and (e) the prevalence of a balanced assessment system.

The difference between administrator and teacher perceptions was significant for beliefs about assessment, perceptions of STARS, the transition between systems, and the prevalence of a balanced assessment system within their districts ( $p < .05$ ). No significance was found in perceptions of NeSA (see Table 34).

Table 34

*Significance by Role*

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Beliefs about assessment*	1	357.891	31.676	.000	.067
Perceptions of STARS*	1	730.650	5.075	.025	.011
Transition*	1	326.660	15.152	.000	.033
Balanced assessment system*	1	144.842	8.356	.004	.019
Error	442	61.490			

Significant at .05 level.

The aggregate mean scores for administrators were higher than teachers in all areas of the survey. Administrators (4.38) and teachers (4.13) were both positive in their beliefs about assessment, with the aggregate mean for both subgroups falling above the “agree” level. Both subgroups were also more positive on items addressing STARS than those addressing NeSA. Administrators were also significantly more confident than teachers in the transition between the systems and the prevalence of a balanced assessment system ( $p < .05$ ) (see Table 35).

A more detailed look at perspectives by role is reported within the expanded themes. Respondents addressed the personal impact of STARS and NeSA in the areas of engagement and in improvement of understanding. Perceptions of improvement at the



Table 35

*Themes by Role*

Source	Administrators N=115	Teachers N=334	Total N=449
1. Beliefs about assessment*	4.38	4.13	4.19
2. Perceptions of STARS*	3.71	3.67	3.68
3. Perceptions of NeSA	3.35	3.31	3.32
4. Transition from STARS to NeSA*	3.81	3.57	3.63
5. Use of a balanced assessment system*	3.72	3.58	3.61

Significant at .05 level.

district level were also addressed. Questions addressing the transition from STARS to NeSA focused on opportunities for training and education on the assessment systems, and on the amount of emphasis placed on each system. The use of local criterion-referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm-referenced assessments on both the personal and district level were analyzed. Finally, educators in all roles thought that a balanced assessment system was present in their district (see Table 36).

While not significant, an item-by-item comparison of administrators' and teachers' perceptions on engagement with STARS and NeSA provided additional information. It is interesting to note that while teachers indicated a higher level of engagement for STARS and for NeSA than the administrators, the opposite was true on personal improvement and on district improvement. While teachers rated their personal engagement in preparing students for assessments and evaluating student progress above the "agree" level for STARS and for NeSA, administrators reached the "agree" level for collaboration to review assessments in NeSA only. NeSA has caused administrators to

Table 36

*Expanded Themes by Role*

Assessments are used:	Administrator N=115	Teacher N=334	Total N=449
1. Assessments in general*	4.38	4.13	4.19
2. STARS*			
a. personal engagement	3.68	3.89	3.83
b. personal improvement	3.73	3.58	3.62
c. personal perception	3.74	3.76	3.75
d. district improvement	3.70	3.52	3.56
3. NeSA			
a. personal engagement	3.43	3.51	3.49
b. personal improvement	3.23	3.15	3.17
c. personal perceptions	3.30	3.33	3.32
d. district improvement	3.39	3.25	3.29
4. Transition from STARS to NeSA*			
a. education on assessment	3.73	3.41	3.49
b. emphasis by district	3.91	3.78	3.81
5. Use of a balanced assessment system*			
a. engagement	3.64	3.65	3.65
b. defined by district	3.66	3.40	3.46
c. used by district	3.72	3.88	3.94

\*Significant at .05 level.

become more actively involved in assessment as they worked in interpreting of results. Both subgroups thought that their personal understanding of the elements of assessment improved more through STARS.

A significant difference existed between administrator and teacher perceptions of district improvement when comparing STARS to NeSA ( $p < .05$ ) (see Table 37).

Table 37

*Comparison of STARS to NeSA by Role*

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Role*	1	185.853	10.842	.001	.024
Error	440	17.141			

\*Significant at .05 level.

It is interesting to note that while administrators were more confident that a balanced assessment was defined within their districts, teachers were more confident that it was being used. Administrators and teachers both indicated that the district improved its student's overall performance more with STARS than with NeSA (see Table 38).

### **Findings – Phase II Qualitative Data**

The findings of the qualitative data gathered in Phase II of this study considered as a whole, was centered around three qualitative research questions:

1. What is the purpose of assessment?
2. What is the impact of STARS on instruction and student learning?
3. What is the impact of NeSA of instruction and student learning?

The questions were explored through qualitative data gathered through open-ended questions as part of the Phase I survey and through personal interviews by the researchers with teachers and administrators in Phase II. As the interview protocol was intentionally aligned with the Phase I survey, the primary themes identified through the qualitative analysis aligned accordingly.

Table 38

*Comparison between STARS and NeSA*

Role Source	Administrators		Teachers	
	STARS	NeSA	STARS	NeSA
Personal engagement in:				
1. development of assessments.	3.46	1.88	3.62	2.09
2. student preparation for assessments.	3.57	3.23	4.06	4.21
3. evaluating student progress using assessments.	3.72	3.95	4.10	3.60
4. collaboration to review results of assessments.	3.92	4.11	3.74	3.75
5. aligning curriculum with standards.	3.83	3.62	3.97	3.80
Personal understanding of:				
6. instruction.	3.48	2.89	3.37	2.96
7. assessment.	3.88	3.06	3.57	3.04
8. using assessment data for planning.	3.75	3.33	3.56	3.21
9. curriculum alignment.	3.77	3.40	3.74	3.25
10. Nebraska Standards.	3.98	3.49	3.86	3.40
*District improved its:				
11. K-12 instructional practices.	3.67	3.27	3.44	3.23
12. K-12 assessment practices.	3.79	3.33	3.52	3.23
13. use of assessment data for instructional planning.	3.69	3.63	3.54	3.39
14. K-12 curriculum alignment process.	3.85	3.51	3.74	3.41
15. student's overall performance.	3.50	3.22	3.34	3.01

\*Significant at .05 level.

The strategy of aligning the Phase II interview protocol with the Phase I survey paralleled the explanatory mixed-methods design selected for the study. After review and reflection, five areas were determined to be the major themes for the qualitative portion of the study: (a) personal beliefs about assessment, (b) perceptions about the STARS system, (c) perceptions about the newly implemented Nebraska Statewide assessment tests (NeSA), (d) experiences with the transition from STARS to NeSA, and (e) progress towards a balanced assessment system. Further coding of the responses provided insight into general categories within each of the five themes of the study (see Table 39).

Teachers and administrators both overwhelmingly indicated that assessment was an important part of the instruction and learning process. This belief is summarized by the comment, “Assessment provides an additional guiding light to the instructors that can refine and direct instruction of students.”

When considering the second theme, STARS, most teachers thought that it had many things to offer in terms of impacting instruction and learning, “STARS was developed by teachers and administrators, was very hands-on, and provided immediate feedback that was very beneficial.” STARS also increased the used of data for planning of instruction and provided increased opportunities for professional development, “The STARS system allowed me to develop assessments that matched the standards and were aligned to our district's curriculum. I was able to test, re-teach, and then retest to make sure students gained proficiency.”

Administrators’ comments about STARS, while positive, were a little more varied. Some administrators thought that STARS was positive, “STARS (and the use of the formative assessment process) has increased collaboration and provided much needed

Table 39

*Themes and Codes - Combined*


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Themes and Codes from interviews and open-ended items from survey.

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1. Personal perceptions about assessment.	
a. informed instruction	31
b. student learning	26
c. accountability	23
d. number of assessments	11
e. time needed for assessments	8
f. used for school improvement	4
2. Perceptions of locally developed, criterion-referenced, assessment process (STARS).	
a. development and collaboration	14
b. alignment and planning	15
c. teaching and learning	27
d. curriculum	16
3. Perceptions of standardized, statewide, criterion-referenced NeSA tests (NeSA).	
a. use of data	24
b. instruction	26
c. administration and use of technology	22
a. development	13
4. Perceptions of the transition from STARS to NeSA.	
a. accountability	27
b. professional involvement	17
c. curriculum	16
5. Perceptions of the prevalence of a balanced assessment system with local school districts.	
a. accountability	31
b. components of a balanced assessment system	26

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direction for instruction.” Others wavered, “Very time consuming but improved performance for those who bought into the process.” Administrators in smaller schools expressed concern about the work load that it created, “Small schools sometimes struggled with the workload and assessments were often left to one or two grade level teachers, rather than having the opportunity for collaboration.”

STARS was generally seen as positive as it related to student learning and instruction. A difference in perception between teachers and administrators involved engagement in the development of assessments. Teachers were deeply immersed in assessment development, while administrators were often more on the periphery of development.

While comments concerning NeSA were not as favorable as those about STARS, they were still relatively positive from both administrators and teachers. Teachers and administrators have generally accepted NeSA as something that is in place for the long term and is now part of the educational landscape. Most educators believe that NeSA is more about accountability and ranking schools than about having a positive impact on instruction. One administrator commented, “While our district changed several practices, I do not believe we improved the practice. Practices were modified to fit the high-stakes testing model.” Another says, “Pressure to score well seems to outweigh instructional focus.” A teacher comment reflected similar concerns:

NeSA is frustrating because there is no immediate feedback, for teachers or for students. It seems that the pressure of accountability is heavy for the staff and the school, but has little impact on the individual student. It is difficult to motivate a student to do their best without immediate feedback or consequence involved.

Members of both groups indicated that curriculum alignment and data analysis has improved, or could potentially improve, with NeSA tests. One educator commented,

“More emphasis has been placed on data analysis so performance in this area has improved.” Another says, “While one-shot tests do not impact instruction, they may be helpful for analysis of data on an annual basis, which could provide a basis for determining district-wide effectiveness.” Administrators and teachers understand that accountability is part of the overall landscape of education and were working to find ways to keep student learning as the primary focus of assessment.

The transition between STARS and NeSA was seen as slightly more positive by administrators than it was by teachers. Unfortunately, both groups indicated that little work was done to prepare for the transition between the two systems. The impact and the timing of the legislation resulting in NeSA didn’t allow for much to be done in advance. As one administrator saw it, “We were just told that we weren’t doing STARS anymore and that you would go to NeSA. I am frustrated with the inconsistency. It seems as though we try something for a little bit and then are forced to go another direction.” A teacher echoed the same sentiment, “STARS tests were continued until NeSA started and then everything was sort of dumped.” The change in assessment systems was often seen as a move from one system to the other, and not a transition.

Administrators and teachers had similar reactions in their perceptions of a balanced assessment system by generally making supportive comments. An administrator said, “A balanced system gives the district information about how well the state standards are being taught and how well the students are learning.” Another commented, “I think it is critical to have a balanced approach. It provides a cumulative picture of a child’s progress over time. Every child can have a bad day, but if a child repeatedly does poorly, this will be evident on a variety of tests.” A teacher commented,



“Utilization of a balanced of assessment system is in keeping with best practice.”

Teachers and administrators indicated that the ultimate goal of assessment is to increase learning when they said, “We use the most advantageous standardized assessments available. Much thought has been put into which assessments are used and based on how well those assessments will benefit students.” While teachers and administrators understand that a balanced system is ideal, they were often unable to define it. Therefore, school districts across Nebraska are at different stages of implementing and utilizing a balanced assessment system.

The public emphasis on assessment for accountability purposes was still the biggest concern, “Obviously since it holds the most importance we will focus our efforts on the NeSA test because it tells how good or bad a system we have.” Teachers and administrators understand the pressure that is involved with the ranking and scoring of schools within the current accountability system. In essence, what gets paid attention to is what gets done. A teacher commented, “Centering everything around NeSA testing is a mistake as it is one test on one day. This is not a true evaluation of a student's true learning.” One administrator bluntly stated his concern, “Too much assessment. The federal system should be thrown out if teachers and principals are fired because of low achieving students even when the students improve.”

In conclusion, when comparing collective comments relative to the overarching question concerning the prevalence of a balanced assessment system, teachers and administrators see its potential value, but have struggled in its implementation.

## **Recommendations**

The data collected by this study has potential value to guide the next steps in understanding what schools and educators need to do to make assessment systems more effective across the state. Educators are positive about assessment, the value of a balanced system, and what a balanced assessment system can mean for instruction. However, these same educators struggle with how to define a balanced system at the local level so that it is doable and meaningful, while addressing the expectations of reporting and accountability.

The following recommendations address the overarching question of this study, “How do administrators and teachers describe their local district’s balanced assessment system, including local criterion-referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm-referenced tests?”

**Recommendation one.** This study has established a baseline for future research relating to a comprehensive balanced assessment system. Continuing study of NeSA tests and focusing on ways to use NeSA for improving instruction and increasing student learning, can guide potential modifications within Nebraska’s comprehensive assessment system.

**Recommendation two.** Supporting agencies such as ESUs and NDE should continue to provide professional development opportunities relating to the development and implementation of a balanced system for local school districts. Assessment philosophy remains the prerogative of local school districts. While districts may not be able to control what is reported and publicized by the media, educators should use assessment data to drive improvement in their district.

**Recommendation three.** Understanding the implications of change and transition remains critical for leaders as they guide their districts to new levels of assessment and accountability.

The leader creates the conditions necessary for the appropriate use and reporting of student achievement information, and for communicating effectively with all members of the school community about student results and their relationship to improving curriculum and instruction. The leader understands the attributes of a sound and balanced assessment system. (Chappuis et al., 2005, p. 99)

Educational leaders need to understand the reaction to change and must deal with the implications of this reaction.

### **Future Research**

Future research identifying schools that are successful in their implementation of an effective and balanced assessment system could help to guide educational leaders as they work towards this ultimate goal. Nebraska is fortunate to have educators with a strong background in assessment who understand its value when utilized at the point-of-instruction. While other states were going different directions in meeting the mandates of federal accountability, Nebraska chose to invest in research-based professional development of their teachers and administrators. Training on assessment needs to continue. Educators would benefit from future studies investigating the impact of previous assessment training efforts within Nebraska. The successes of these efforts must be replicated in current and future assessment strategies.

An additional study could look at Nebraska's assessment system from the student perspective. A great deal of time and emphasis is put into assessment of students, but no one has ever asked how students feel about assessment. When students feel that the instruction and information is relative to their needs, they tend to become much more

engaged. Research indicates that engaged students are successful students. Districts take a leap of faith when they rely on students to perform on assessment of which students do not see relevance.

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**Appendix A**

**Nebraska Assessment Systems Survey**

***Perceptions of Nebraska educators regarding the transition from STARS to NeSA and its perceived influence on the implementation of a balanced assessment system.***

***"How do administrators and teachers describe their district's balanced assessment systems including local criterion-referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm-referenced tests?"***

*The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of Nebraska educators about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA and their perceptions of the influence on that shift on implementing a balanced assessment system. The study will be utilized to frame a picture of the Nebraska assessment system during this period of transition and to provide guidance to schools in the implementation of a balanced assessment system. The Superintendent (or designee) in your district has determined your eligibility and recommended you for this study.*

UNDEFINED

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Purpose of the Research:** The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of Nebraska educators about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA and the influence of that shift on implementation of a balanced assessment system.

**Participants:** Educators selected to receive the survey were those who work within a public school district located within Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District and have been involved in Nebraska's assessment systems under STARS, NeSA or a combination of both.

**Procedures:** Completion of the survey will require approximately 15 minutes of your time. The survey consists of 54 questions related to your perceptions of assessment, STARS, NeSA, national norm-referenced assessments, and the prevalence of a balanced assessment system in your school. You will also be given the opportunity to consent to be considered for a follow-up interview. This is not required for participation in the survey.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:** There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. In the event of problems resulting from participation in the study, psychological treatment is available on a sliding fee scale at the UNL Psychological Consultation Center, telephone (402) 472-2351.

**Benefits:** If interested, you will receive a copy of this study's findings. You may find the results of this study validate your perception of assessment and the Nebraska assessment system(s). You will also have an opportunity to discover how educators in other schools within Nebraska's 3rd congressional district feel about assessment.

**Confidentiality:** Any information obtained during this study, which could identify you, will be kept strictly confidential. All personally identifiable information will be removed from the study narrative and aliases will be used to protect your privacy.

**Compensation:** There will be no compensation for participating in this phase of the research.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:** You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. You may also call one or both of the principal investigators at numbers identified on the following page. Please contact an investigator:

- if you want to voice concerns or complaints about the research, or
- in the event of a research related injury, or
- if you would like to receive a copy of the results of the study.

**Freedom to Withdraw:** Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researcher, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or your school district, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent:** You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. You will be given the opportunity to continue with the survey, thus giving consent to participate, or to exit the survey and not participate.

---

**Names and phone numbers of investigators:**

Jamie Isom, Ed.S. Principal Investigator	Phone: (402) 376-1780
Michael Teahon, Ed.S. Principal Investigator	Phone: (308) 537-3651
Jody Isernhagen, Ed.D. Secondary Investigator	Phone: (402) 472-1088

**I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary.**

- I provide consent and I am ready to begin the survey.
- I have decided not to participate in the survey. Thank you for considering me.

<< >>

## Section 1: PERSONAL BELIEFS ABOUT ASSESSMENT.

The following questions are meant to gather information on your personal beliefs about assessment in general.

1.1 Assessment is an important part of planning for instruction.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

1.2 Assessment is an important part of evaluating student progress.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

1.3 Assessment is an important part of improving student learning.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

1.4 Assessment is an important part of school improvement.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

1.5 Assessment is an important part of school accountability.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

(Optional) Add comments to describe your personal beliefs about assessment in general.





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## Section 2a: PERSONAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE LOCALLY DEVELOPED CRITERION-REFERENCED ASSESSMENT PROCESS (STARS).

The following questions are meant to gather information on your perceptions about the locally developed, classroom based, criterion-referenced assessments within the Nebraska STARS system.

### *a. Engagement (personal) - STARS*

**2.1 I was actively involved in the DEVELOPMENT of local criterion-referenced assessments within the STARS process.**

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neither Agree nor Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree  
                                                                                       

**2.2 I was actively involved in student's PREPARATION for local criterion-referenced assessments within the STARS process.**

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neither Agree nor Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree  
                                                                                       

**2.3 I was active in evaluating student's PROGRESS using local criterion-referenced assessments within the STARS process.**

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neither Agree nor Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree  
                                                                                       

**2.4 I actively COLLABORATED with colleagues to review results of local criterion-referenced assessments within the STARS process.**

Neither Agree nor

Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

**2.5 I actively participated in ALIGNING CURRICULUM with Nebraska standards within the STARS process.**

Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Neither Agree nor Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

<< >>

## Section 2b: PERSONAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE LOCALLY DEVELOPED CRITERION-REFERENCED ASSESSMENT PROCESS (STARS).

The following questions are meant to gather information on your perceptions about the locally developed, classroom based, criterion-referenced assessments within the Nebraska STARS process.

### *b. Improvement (personal) - STARS*

**2.6 My personal understanding of INSTRUCTION improved within the STARS process.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**2.7 My personal understanding of ASSESSMENT improved within the STARS process.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**2.8 My personal understanding of how assessment data can be used in instructional PLANNING improved within the STARS process.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**2.9 My personal understanding of CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT improved within the STARS process.**

Neither Agree nor

Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

**2.10 My personal understanding of Nebraska State Academic STANDARDS improved within the STARS process.**

Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Neither Agree nor Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

**2.11 My personal understanding of my PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE improved within the STARS process.**

Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Neither Agree nor Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

<< >>

## Section 2c: PERSONAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE LOCALLY DEVELOPED CRITERION-REFERENCED ASSESSMENT PROCESS (STARS).

The following questions are meant to gather information on your perceptions about the locally developed, classroom based, criterion-referenced assessments within the Nebraska STARS system.

### *c. Improvement (District) - STARS*

2.12 My district improved its K-12 INSTRUCTIONAL practices within the STARS process.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2.13 My district improved its K-12 ASSESSMENT practices within the STARS process.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2.14 My district improved its use of assessment data for instructional PLANNING within the STARS process.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2.15 My district improved its K-12 CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT process within the STARS process.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2.16 My district improved student's OVERALL performance within the STARS process.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**(Optional) Add comments to describe your perceptions about the locally developed, classroom based, criterion-referenced assessments within the Nebraska STARS system.**

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### Section 3a: PERSONAL PERCEPTIONS OF NEBRASKA'S STATEWIDE ASSESSMENT TESTS (NeSA).

The following questions are meant to gather information on your perceptions about the Nebraska State Accountability tests (NeSA).

#### *a. Engagement (personal) - NeSA*

**3.1 I was actively involved in the DEVELOPMENT of NeSA tests.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**3.2 I was actively involved in student's PREPARATION for NeSA tests.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**3.3 I was actively involved in evaluating student's PROGRESS using NeSA test results.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**3.4 I actively COLLABORATED with colleagues to review NeSA test results.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



**3.5 I actively participated in ALIGNING CURRICULUM with Nebraska standards in preparation for NeSA tests.**

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neither Agree nor Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree

<<      >>

## Section 3b: PERSONAL PERCEPTIONS OF NEBRASKA'S STATEWIDE ASSESSMENT TESTS (NeSA).

The following questions are meant to gather information on your perceptions about the Nebraska State Accountability tests (NeSA).

### *b. Improvement (personal) - NeSA*

**3.6 My personal understanding of INSTRUCTION improved after NeSA testing was implemented.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**3.7 My personal understanding of ASSESSMENT improved after the NeSA testing was implemented.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**3.8 My personal understanding of how assessment data can be used in instructional PLANNING improved after NeSA testing was implemented.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**3.9 My personal understanding of CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT improved after NeSA testing was implemented.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**3.10 My personal understanding of Nebraska State Academic STANDARDS improved after NeSA testing was implemented.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**3.11 My personal understanding of my PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE improved after NeSA testing was implemented.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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### Section 3c: PERSONAL PERCEPTIONS OF NEBRASKA'S STATEWIDE ASSESSMENT TESTS (NeSA).

The following questions are meant to gather information on your perceptions about the Nebraska State Accountability tests (NeSA).

#### *c. Improvement (District) - NeSA*

3.12 My district improved its INSTRUCTIONAL practices after NeSA testing was implemented.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3.13 My district improved its K-12 ASSESSMENT practices after NeSA testing was implemented.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3.14 My district improved its use of assessment data for instructional PLANNING after NeSA testing was implemented.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3.15 My district improved its CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT process after NeSA testing was implemented.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3.16 My district improved its student's OVERALL performance after NeSA testing was implemented.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

(Optional) Add comments to describe your perceptions about the Nebraska State Accountability tests (NeSA).

<< >>

## Section 4: PERSONAL PERCEPTIONS OF MY DISTRICT'S TRANSITION FROM STARS TO NeSA.

The following questions are meant to gather information on your perceptions about the transition from the Nebraska STARS assessments to the statewide tests within NeSA.

**4.1 My district provided opportunity for me to learn about the STARS process.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**4.2 My district provided opportunity for me to learn about the NeSA system.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**4.3 My district involved me in changes made to the assessment process.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**4.4 My district assisted in helping me understand the DIFFERENCE between STARS and NeSA in a balanced assessment system.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**4.5 My district assisted in helping me understand the ROLE of STARS and NeSA in a balanced assessment system.**

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**4.6 My district's emphasis on ASSESSMENT has experienced the following change during the transition from the Nebraska STARS assessments to the statewide tests within NeSA.**

Substantially Decreased	Decreased	Neither increased or decreased	Increased	Substantially Increased
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**4.7 My district's emphasis on CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT with Nebraska State Academic Standards has experienced the following change during the transition from the Nebraska STARS assessments to the statewide tests within NeSA.**

Substantially Decreased	Decreased	Neither increased or decreased	Increased	Substantially Increased
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**4.8 My district's emphasis on STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT has experienced the following change during the transition from the Nebraska STARS assessments to the statewide tests within NeSA.**

Substantially Decreased	Decreased	Neither increased or decreased	Increased	Substantially Increased
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**4.9 My district's emphasis on ACCOUNTABILITY has experienced the following change during the transitions from the Nebraska STARS assessments to the statewide tests within NeSA.**

Substantially Decreased	Decreased	Neither increased or decreased	Increased	Substantially Increased
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**(Optional) Add comments on your perceptions about the transition from the Nebraska STARS assessments to the statewide tests within NeSA.**

<< >>

## Section 5a: PERSONAL PERCEPTIONS OF A BALANCED ASSESSMENT SYSTEM.

This portion of the survey is meant to gather information on the use of a balanced assessment system in your district.

### *a. Engagement (personal)*

5.1 I personally use locally developed criterion-referenced assessments to question, modify, and to adjust my teaching or the teaching of the staff that I supervise.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5.2 I personally use NeSA test results to question, modify, and to adjust my teaching or the teaching of the staff that I supervise.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5.3 I personally use national norm-referenced tests to question, modify, and to adjust my teaching or the teaching of the staff that I supervise.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

<< >>



## Section 5b: PERSONAL PERCEPTIONS OF A BALANCED ASSESSMENT SYSTEM.

This portion of the survey is meant to gather information on the use of a balanced assessment system in your district.

### *b. District assessment practices*

5.4 My district defines how locally developed criterion-referenced assessments (STARS) fit into effective teaching and learning.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5.5 My district defines how statewide NeSA tests fit into effective teaching and learning.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5.6 My district defines how national norm-referenced tests fit into effective teaching and learning.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

<< >>

### Section 5c: PERSONAL PERCEPTIONS OF A BALANCED ASSESSMENT SYSTEM.

This portion of the survey is meant to gather information on the use of a balanced assessment system in your district.

#### *c. Balanced Assessment Practices*

5.7 My district utilizes a balanced assessment system including local criterion-referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm-referenced tests.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neither Agree nor Disagree      Agree      Strongly Agree

5.8 Please describe the current assessment system in your district utilized to monitor student performance including national norm-referenced tests, state tests (NeSA), local criterion-referenced tests, and other assessments.

(Optional) Add comments concerning your perceptions about the prevalence of a balanced assessment system within your district.

<< >>

## Section 6: Demographics

This portion of the survey provides information to be used for item analysis. Any information obtained during this study, which could identify you, will be kept strictly confidential. All personally identifiable information will be removed from the study narrative and aliases will be used to protect your privacy.

### 6.1 Gender

Male

Female

### 6.2 CONSECUTIVE years in a Nebraska public school including the current year?

### 6.3 Years within your current district including current year?

### 6.4 I work at the following level(s)

Elementary

Middle/Junior High

Secondary

District

### 6.5 I serve in the following role(s) within my school:

Administrator

Teacher

Other

**6.6a I serve in the following role(s) as an administrator:**

- |                          |                          |                                      |                          |                          |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Superintendent           | Principal                | Curriculum/Assessment<br>Coordinator | Counselor                | Other                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**6.6c I serve as curriculum and/or assessment coordinator as part of my assignment.**

- |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Yes                   | No                    |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

**The grades of students I current serve include: (select all that apply)**

- |                            |                              |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> K | <input type="checkbox"/> 7   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> 8   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> 9   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> 10  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> 11  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> 12  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6 | <input type="checkbox"/> ALL |

**(Optional) Additional comments concerning your position or experience.**

<< >>

**6.6b I teach in the following area(s):**

Reading/Language Arts

Mathematics

Science

Other

**6.6c I serve as curriculum and/or assessment coordinator as part of my assignment.**

Yes

No

**The grades of students I current serve include: (select all that apply)**

K

7

1

8

2

9

3

10

4

11

5

12

6

ALL

**(Optional) Additional comments concerning your position or experience.**

<< >>

## Section 7: Consent for follow-up interview

**7.1 Would you be willing to be considered for a follow-up interview about your experiences related to STARS and NeSA and your district's use of a balanced assessment system if selected for the second phase of the study?**

Participation in this study will require approximately 30-60 minutes of your time. You will participate in a personal interview consisting of seven questions related to your perceptions of assessment, STARS, NeSA, national norm-referenced assessments, and the prevalence of a balanced assessment system in your school. The researcher will schedule this interview at a mutually agreed-upon time between December 1, 2011 and March 1, 2012.

You will have the opportunity to review the transcript and notes from the interview to confirm the information is correct. You may be invited to provide clarification, however, no additional interviews will be required. Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential.

Yes, I would be willing to be considered for a follow-up interview.

No, I am not interested at this time.

<< >>

**THANK YOU for taking time to complete the survey. Please select "yes" if you are interested in receiving a copy of the survey results.**

- Yes, please send me an electronic copy of the survey results.
- No, I am not interested in receiving an electronic copy of the survey results.

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## **Appendix B**

### **Phase I Informed Consent for Survey**






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 INFORMED CONSENT FORM for Phase I Survey
 

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**Identification of Project:**

Perceptions of Nebraska Educators Regarding the Transition from STARS to NeSA and its perceived Influence on the Implementation of a Balanced Assessment System.

**Purpose of the Research:**

The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of Nebraska educators about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA and the influence of that shift on implementation of a balanced assessment system.

**Participants:**

Educators selected to receive the survey were those who work within a public school district located within Nebraska's 3<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District and have been involved in Nebraska's assessment systems under STARS, NeSA or a combination of both.

**Procedures:**

Completion of the survey will require approximately 15 minutes of your time. The survey consists of 56 questions related to your perceptions of assessment, STARS, NeSA, national norm-referenced assessments, and the prevalence of a balanced assessment system in your school. You will also be given the opportunity to consent to be considered for a follow-up interview. This is not required for participation in the survey.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. In the event of problems resulting from participation in the study, psychological treatment is available on a sliding fee scale at the UNL Psychological Consultation Center, telephone (402) 472-2351.

**Benefits:**

If interested, you will receive a copy of this study's findings. You may find the results of this study validate your perception of assessment and the Nebraska assessment system(s). You will also have an opportunity to discover how educators in other schools within Nebraska's 3<sup>rd</sup> congressional district feel about assessment.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained during this study, which could identify you, will be kept strictly confidential. All personally identifiable information will be removed from the study narrative and aliases will be used to protect your privacy.

**Compensation:**

There will be no compensation for participating in this phase of the research.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. You may also call one or both of the principal investigators at numbers identified on the following page. Please contact an investigator:

- if you want to voice concerns or complaints about the research, or
- in the event of a research related injury, or
- if you would like to receive a copy of the results of the study.

If you would like to speak to someone other than the researchers, please contact the Research Compliance Services Office at 402-472-6995.

***Freedom to Withdraw:***

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researcher, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or your school district, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

***Consent:***

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. You will be given the opportunity to continue with the survey, thus giving consent to participate, or to exit the survey and not participate.

***Names and phone numbers of investigators:***

*Jamie Isom, Ed.S. Principal Investigator*

*Phone: (402) 376-1780*

*Michael Teahon, Ed.S. Principal Investigator*

*Phone: (308) 537-3651*

*Jody Isernhagen, Ph. D. Secondary Investigator*

*Phone: (402) 472-1088*

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**Appendix C**

**Phase I Superintendent Introductory Letter**



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IRB # [20110911924 EX](#) and [20110912010 EX](#)

Dear Superintendent,

We are contacting you to ask for your help in preparation for a joint research study that we will be conducting as part of the requirements for completion of doctoral programs at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of Nebraska educators about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA and the influence of that shift on implementation of a balanced assessment system. As superintendents of two Nebraska public schools, we believe that the study is timely and has the opportunity to provide valuable information to Nebraska educational leaders as Nebraska continues its transition in assessment philosophy.

An electronic message will follow to provide additional explanation of the study, describe eligibility of educators in your district and include the request for contact information. We will be asking you, or your designee, to provide email contact information for educators in your district that have been part of the state assessment process as administrators or as teachers working in the core curricular areas.

Eligible educators will be contacted and asked to participate in the research study during the fall term, 2011. Participants will be asked to complete an online survey intended to gather information about involvement in Nebraska assessments, past and present.

Educator participation in the survey is voluntary and participants may withdraw at any time without consequences. Answers on the survey will be kept confidential. Data will be secure and any report of this research that is made available to the public, will not include participants names or any other individual information.

If you have questions, please contact either of us at the email addresses listed below or you may contact our advisor, Dr. Jody Isernhagen at (402) 472-1088. A summary of the results of this study will be sent upon your request and will be available after the study is completed.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Jamie Isom ([jsisiom@esu17.org](mailto:jsisiom@esu17.org))

Mr. Mike Teahon ([mteahon@esu10.org](mailto:mteahon@esu10.org))

Dr. Jodi Isernhagen ([jisernhagen3@unl.edu](mailto:jisernhagen3@unl.edu))

**Appendix D**

**Phase I Superintendent Follow-up Email**



IRB # 20110912010 EX and 20110911924 EX

Dear Superintendent,

We are contacting you to ask for your help in preparation for a joint research study that we will be conducting as part of the requirements for completion of doctoral programs at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of Nebraska educators about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA and the influence of that shift on implementation of a balanced assessment system.

We are asking you, or your designee, to provide email contact information for educators in your district that have been part of the state assessment process as administrators or as teachers. Educator participation in the survey is voluntary and participants may withdraw at any time without consequences.

Nebraska administrators involved in the state assessment process are defined as superintendents and principals for the purpose of this study. Nebraska teachers involved in the state assessment process are defined as teachers of reading/language arts, math or science in grades 3 through 8 and grade 11. You are encouraged to include all eligible educators and also include any educators whom you are unsure of their eligibility for the study. The researchers will make final determination of eligibility utilizing data collected in the demographic portion of the survey.

The information may be submitted in a spreadsheet, a word-processing document, or within the body of an email message. Please submit the contact information in the following format:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Position</u>	<u>Email Address</u>
Jane Doe	Superintendent	<a href="mailto:jdoe@esu99.org">jdoe@esu99.org</a>
Abe Lincoln	Teacher	<a href="mailto:honestabe@gmail.com">honestabe@gmail.com</a>

Thank you very much for your consideration of our request for contact information. A summary of the results of this study will be sent upon your request and will be available after the study is completed.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Jamie Isom ([jisiom@esu17.org](mailto:jisiom@esu17.org))

Mr. Mike Teahon ([mteahon@esu10.org](mailto:mteahon@esu10.org))

Dr. Jodi Isernhagen ([jisernhagen3@unl.edu](mailto:jisernhagen3@unl.edu))

**Appendix E**

**Phase I Superintendent 2nd Follow-up Email**



IRB # 20110912010 EX and 20110911924 EX

Dear Superintendent,

This electronic message serves as a second follow-up to the introductory letter sent to you previously (attached for your convenience.) As superintendents in two Nebraska public schools, we believe that the study is timely and has the opportunity to provide valuable information to Nebraska educational leaders as Nebraska continues its transition in assessment philosophy.

We are asking you, or your designee, to provide email contact information for educators in your district that have been part of the state assessment process as administrators or as teachers. Educator participation in the survey is voluntary and participants may withdraw at any time without consequences.

Nebraska administrators involved in the state assessment process are defined as superintendents and principals for the purpose of this study. Nebraska teachers involved in the state assessment process are defined as teachers of reading/language arts, math or science in grades 3 through 8 and grade 11. You are encouraged to include all eligible educators and also include any educators whom you are unsure of their eligibility for the study. The researchers will make final determination of eligibility utilizing data collected in the demographic portion of the survey.

The information may be submitted in a spreadsheet, a word-processing document, or within the body of an email message. Please submit the contact information in the following format:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Position</u>	<u>Email Address</u>
Jane Doe	Superintendent	<a href="mailto:jdoe@esu99.org">jdoe@esu99.org</a>
Abe Lincoln	Teacher	<a href="mailto:honestabe@gmail.com">honestabe@gmail.com</a>

Thank you very much for your consideration of our request for contact information. All school districts within Nebraska's 3<sup>rd</sup> congressional district have been included in the survey population to reduce coverage error so we appreciate your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Jamie Isom ([jisom@esu17.org](mailto:jisom@esu17.org))

Mr. Mike Teahon ([mteahon@esu10.org](mailto:mteahon@esu10.org))

Dr. Jodi Isernhagen ([jisernhagen3@unl.edu](mailto:jisernhagen3@unl.edu))



**Appendix F**

**Phase I Pre-notice Template**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

The \_\_\_\_\_ Schools, as well as all public schools within Nebraska's 3<sup>rd</sup> congressional district, have been asked to participate in a research project conducted by doctoral students from the University of Nebraska. The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of Nebraska educators about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA and the influence of that shift on implementation of a balanced assessment system.

Email contact information of administrators and teachers in our district who have been involved in the state assessment process has been provided to the researchers. Educator participation in the survey is voluntary and participants may withdraw at any time without consequences. Answers on the survey will be kept confidential. Data will be secure and any report of this research that is made available to the public, will not include participants names or any other individual information.

In the next few days you will receive an electronic message containing a link to a survey hosted by Qualtrics. This study on Nebraska assessment practices is timely and has the opportunity to provide valuable information to Nebraska educational leaders as Nebraska continues its transition in assessment philosophy. The perceptions of educators within \_\_\_\_\_ Schools will be a valuable part of this research. I encourage you to complete the survey in a timely matter.

Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_, Superintendent of Schools

**Appendix G**

**Phase I Invitation to Participate**



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IRB # 20110912010 EX and 20110911924 EX

Dear Educator,

You are invited to participate in a research study regarding assessment in Nebraska. The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of Nebraska educators about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA and the influence of that shift on implementation of a balanced assessment system. This research will be used as part of a joint research project being done towards partial fulfillment of requirements of a doctoral program from the University of Nebraska Lincoln. The study is timely and has the opportunity to provide valuable information to Nebraska educational leaders as Nebraska continues its transition in assessment philosophy.

Information for the study will be collected through an online survey done under the direction of our advisor, Dr. Jody Isernhagen. Your identity will be kept confidential in this project. While the survey will be tracked, a list of names and identification numbers will be kept secured with the researchers and will be destroyed upon completion of the project. Results of the study will be published in a doctoral dissertation, but no participants will be identified.

There is also the opportunity for participation in follow up interviews. These follow-up interviews will be recorded and transcribed for use only by the researchers as part of this project. Interviewees will receive a \$25 Visa Gift Card.

Participation is voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with UNL or with me as the researcher.

An email will be distributed notifying participants of the completion of the project. You will be provided contact information for the researchers at that time should you want to receive a summary of the findings of the study.

***Please go to the following link to complete the survey:***

(Add link to message)

Thank you very much for your assistance,

Mrs. Jamie Isom ([jsisom@esu17.org](mailto:jsisom@esu17.org))

Mr. Mike Teahon ([mteahon@esu10.org](mailto:mteahon@esu10.org))

Dr. Jodi Isernhagen ([jisernhagen3@unl.edu](mailto:jisernhagen3@unl.edu))

**Appendix H**

**Phase I Educator 1st Follow-up**



IRB # 20110912010 EX and 20110911924 EX

Dear Educator,

This electronic message serves as the follow-up to the introductory message sent to you previously (attached for your convenience.) Please refer to the initial message for more in-depth explanation of the purpose of the study and data collection process being utilized.

We are contacting you to ask for your help in preparation for a joint research study that we will be conducting as part of the requirements for completion of doctoral programs at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of Nebraska educators about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA and the influence of that shift on implementation of a balanced assessment system.

We are asking you because of your experience with assessment in Nebraska and your perceptions about that experience are valuable to this project. Your participation in the survey is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without consequences. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes and may be found at the following link. (Insert URL for survey)

For the purposes of this study, Nebraska teachers involved in the state assessment process are defined as teachers of reading/language arts, math or science in grades 3 through 8 and grade 11. Of the educators participating, four will be selected for follow up interviews. Should you be selected for a follow up interview, you will receive a \$25 gift card.

Thank you very much for your consideration of our request for participation. A summary of the results of this study will be sent upon your request and will be available after the study is completed.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Jamie Isom ([jsisiom@esu17.org](mailto:jsisiom@esu17.org))

Mr. Mike Teahon ([mteahon@esu10.org](mailto:mteahon@esu10.org))

Dr. Jodi Isernhagen ([jisernhagen3@unl.edu](mailto:jisernhagen3@unl.edu))

**Appendix I**

**Phase I Educator 2nd Follow-up**



IRB # 20110912010 EX and 20110911924 EX

Dear Educator,

This electronic message serves as a second follow-up reminder asking for your participation in an online survey relating to your perceptions of assessment in Nebraska. The previous two messages are attached to this email message for you to refer to.

We are contacting you to ask for your help in gathering information for a joint research study that we will be conducting as part of the requirements for completion of doctoral programs at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of Nebraska educators about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA and the influence of that shift on implementation of a balanced assessment system.

We are asking you because of your experience with assessment in Nebraska and your perceptions about that experience are valuable to this project. Your participation in the survey is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without consequences. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes.

For the purposes of this study, Nebraska teachers involved in the state assessment process are defined as teachers of reading/language arts, math or science in grades 3 through 8 and grade 11. Of the educators participating, four will be selected for follow up interviews. Should you be selected for a follow up interview, you will receive a \$25 gift card.

Thank you very much for your consideration of our request for participation. A summary of the results of this study will be sent upon your request and will be available after the study is completed.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Jamie Isom ([jsisiom@esu17.org](mailto:jsisiom@esu17.org))

Mr. Mike Teahon ([mteahon@esu10.org](mailto:mteahon@esu10.org))

Dr. Jodi Isernhagen ([jisernhagen3@unl.edu](mailto:jisernhagen3@unl.edu))



## **Appendix J**

### **Phase II Interview Protocol**

## Phase II - Qualitative Research Questions

How do administrators and teachers describe their district's balanced assessment system including local criterion-referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm-referenced tests?

### Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_ Time of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Participant Profile

Participant Code: \_\_\_\_\_  
Level: Elem\_\_ Middle\_\_ Secondary\_\_ District\_\_  
Position: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Introduction:

1. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview. I am seeking your perceptions on Nebraska's assessment system and the prevalence of a balanced assessment system in your school. The information from this research will be provided to the Nebraska Department of Education and to the University of Nebraska.
2. You have had a chance to review the general questions that we will discuss today. While they will serve as a framework for our discussion, I may expand upon the questions throughout the conversation.
3. This interview is strictly confidential. Information provided by school and district staff is reported in aggregated form only. Districts, schools, and individuals are not identified.
4. I have an Informed Consent form outlining your rights as a research participant. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw from the study at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigators, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or the Nebraska Department of Education. Are you willing to participate in the interview?
5. Contact persons for the project and the Institutional Review Board are provide on the Informed Consent Form in case you have questions or concerns. I have a copy for you to sign and one for you to keep for your use.
6. I will be recording our discussion and transcribing what we say verbatim. You will have a chance to review the transcript upon completion of the transcription and will have an opportunity to provide additional input to make sure the final comments reflect your feelings in this area.
7. Your confidentiality will be maintained in the summary of findings. If you would like a copy of the final summary, one will be provided.
8. Do you have any procedural questions before we begin?

Let's begin. Please state your name, school, and district and verbally give permission to record this interview.

**Phase II - Qualitative Research Questions**

How do administrators and teachers describe their district’s balanced assessment system including local criterion-referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm-referenced tests?

**Interview Questions**

1. What do you believe is the purpose of assessment?

**Probes**

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. Is it part of planning instruction?
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. Is it part of evaluating student progress?
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. Is it part of improving student learning?
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. Is it part of school improvement?
- \_\_\_\_\_ e. Is it part of school accountability?

Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes

2. How would you describe your school’s assessment process during the STARS?

- CRT’s are assessments where each student’s score is compared to a predetermined level of performance.

**Probes**

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. How were/are STARS assessments developed?
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. Was/is training on the use of STARS assessments provided?
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. How were/are STARS assessments administered?
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. How was/is STARS data used?
- \_\_\_\_\_ e. How did/does STARS impact teaching and learning?

Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes

**Phase II - Qualitative Research Questions**

How do administrators and teachers describe their district's balanced assessment system including local criterion-referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm-referenced tests?

3. How would you describe your school's assessment process during the NeSA?
- A statewide test of Nebraska academic content standards for reading, mathematics, and science implemented in 2008.

**Probes**

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. Is training on the NeSA tests provided?
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. How are students prepared for the NeSA tests?
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. How are NeSA assessments administered?
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. How is NeSA data used?
- \_\_\_\_\_ e. How does NeSA impact teaching and learning?

Descriptive Notes

Reflective Notes

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4. How would you describe your school's utilization of national norm-referenced tests?
- An assessment of performance in relation to a norm group of students who took the test under the same conditions. National assessment instruments recommended by NDE include Terra Nova, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, Stanford Achievement Test, Northwest Evaluation Assessment and the ACT Plan Test (10<sup>th</sup> only).

**Probes**

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. Is training on the use norm-referenced tests provided?
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. How are students prepared for NRTs?
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. How is NRT data used?
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. How do NRTs impact teaching and learning?

Descriptive Notes

Reflective Notes

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**Phase II - Qualitative Research Questions**

How do administrators and teachers describe their district’s balanced assessment system including local criterion-referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm-referenced tests?

5. How would you describe your district’s transition from STARS to NeSA?

**Probes**

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. Were teachers involved in the transition?
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. Was a district philosophy of assessment discussed?
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. Are locally developed CRTs used in conjunction with NeSA?
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. How would you describe the changes in instruction as your district moves from STARS to NeSA?
- \_\_\_\_\_ e. How would you describe the changes in student learning as your district moves from STARS to NeSA?

Descriptive Notes

Reflective Notes

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6. How would you describe your district’s balanced assessment system?

- NDE defines a balanced assessment system as one including locally developed criterion-referenced assessments for instructional information, statewide NeSA assessments for state comparison, and national norm-referenced attesting used for a national benchmark perspective.

**Probes**

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. Has your district defined a philosophy on a balanced assessment system?
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. Is data from local CRTs still used and how?
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. Is NeSA data used and how?
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. Is data from NRTs used and how?
- \_\_\_\_\_ e. Does your district’s assessment system improve instruction?
- \_\_\_\_\_ f. Does your district’s assessment system increase learning?

Descriptive Notes

Reflective Notes

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**Phase II - Qualitative Research Questions**

How do administrators and teachers describe their district's balanced assessment system including local criterion-referenced assessments, statewide NeSA tests, and national norm-referenced tests?

7. What comments, recommendations, or final observations would you like to make about assessment that we have not discussed?

Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes

**Appendix K**

**Phase II Informed Consent**




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 INFORMED CONSENT FORM for Phase II, Qualitative Study
 

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**Identification of Project:**

Perceptions of Nebraska Educators Regarding the Transition from STARS to NeSA and its perceived Influence on the Implementation of a Balanced Assessment System.

**Purpose of the Research:**

The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of Nebraska educators about their experiences in the transition from STARS to NeSA and the influence of that shift on implementation of a balanced assessment system.

**Procedures:**

Participation in this study will require approximately 30-60 minutes of your time. You will participate in a personal interview consisting of seven questions related to your perceptions of assessment, STARS, NeSA, national norm-referenced assessments, and the prevalence of a balanced assessment system in your school. You were selected for participation in a follow-up interview based on your responses to the initial online survey.

Additional probing questions will be asked as appropriate. The researcher will schedule this interview at a mutually agreed-upon time and place between October 25, 2011 and March 1, 2012. An audio recording of the interview will be made at the time of the interview, which will be transcribed to be used only as part of this research project. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript and notes from the interview to confirm the information is correct and will be invited to provide clarification; however, no additional interviews will be required.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. In the event of problems resulting from participation in the study, psychological treatment is available on a sliding fee scale at the UNL Psychological Consultation Center, telephone (402) 472-2351.

**Benefits:**

If interested, you will receive a copy of this study's findings. You may find the results of this study validate your perception of assessment and the Nebraska assessment system(s). You will also have an opportunity to discover how educators in other schools within Nebraska's 3<sup>rd</sup> congressional district feel about assessment.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The interview recording will be transcribed verbatim and the recording will be erased after transcription. The transcription data will be stored in a password-protected computer account only accessible by the researcher. All personally identifiable information will be removed from the study narrative and aliases will be used to protect your privacy.

**Compensation:**

You will receive a \$25 gift card for participating in this phase of the research.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. You may also call one or both of the principal investigators at numbers identified on the following page. Please contact an investigator:

- if you want to voice concerns or complaints about the research, or
- in the event of a research related injury.

If you would like to speak to someone other than the researchers, please contact the Research Compliance Services Office at 402-472-6995.



**Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researcher, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or your school district, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to what you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_ Check if you agree to be audio taped during the interview.

**Signature of Participant:**

\_\_\_\_\_ *Signature of Research Participant* \_\_\_\_\_ *Date*

**Names and phone numbers of principal investigators**

<i>Jamie Isom, Ed.S. Principal Investigator</i>	<i>Phone: (402) 376-1780</i>
<i>Michael Teahon, Ed.S. Principal Investigator</i>	<i>Phone: (308) 537-3651</i>
<i>Jody Isernhagen, Ed.D. Secondary Investigator</i>	<i>Phone: (402) 472-1088</i>

---

**Please return this consent form to one of the Principal Investigators through one of the following methods:**

- **E-mail attachment or fax to either:**

- |  |                            |
|--|----------------------------|
| o <a href="mailto:jsisiom@esu17.org">jsisiom@esu17.org</a>       | <b>Fax: (402) 376-2736</b> |
| o <a href="mailto:mteahon@esu10.org">mteahon@esu10.org</a>       | <b>Fax: (308) 537-3965</b> |
| o <a href="mailto:jisernhagen3@unl.edu">jisernhagen3@unl.edu</a> | <b>Fax: (308) 472-1089</b> |

**Appendix L**

**Phase II Invitation to Interview**



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IRB # 20110912010 EX and 20110911924 EX

Dear Educator,

You recently completed an online survey regarding assessment in Nebraska, your perceptions of the transition from STARS to NeSA and the influence of that shift on implementation of a balanced assessment system. As part of that survey completion process, you indicated your willingness to be considered for the interview portion of the study. You have been selected for the Phase II interview.

Four administrators and four teachers were selected to be part of the second phase of the project. You will be interviewed in person and the interview is expected to take approximately one hour to complete. You will receive a \$25 gift card upon completion of the interview.

This research will be used as part of a joint research project, which will fulfill requirements of a doctoral program from the University of Nebraska Lincoln. The study is timely and has the opportunity to provide valuable information to Nebraska educational leaders as Nebraska continues its transition in assessment philosophy.

Your identity will be kept confidential in this project. Results of the study will be published in a doctoral dissertation, but no participants will be identified. Participation in the survey will be voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with UNL or the researchers.

A follow-up email will be distributed notifying participants of the completion of the project. You will be provided contact information for the researchers should you want to receive a summary of the findings of the study.

Thank you very much for your assistance,

Mrs. Jamie Isom ([jisom@esu17.org](mailto:jisom@esu17.org))

Mr. Mike Teahon ([mteahon@esu10.org](mailto:mteahon@esu10.org))

Dr. Jodi Isernhagen ([jisernhagen3@unl.edu](mailto:jisernhagen3@unl.edu))

**Appendix M**

**Phase II Follow-up for Invitation to Interview**



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IRB # 20110912010 EX and 20110911924 EX

Dear Educator,

This is a reminder asking for your participation in a follow-up interview regarding assessment in Nebraska, your perceptions of the transition from STARS to NeSA and the influence of that shift on implementation of a balanced assessment system. As part of that survey completion process, you indicated your willingness to be considered for the interview portion of the study. You have been selected for the Phase II interview.

Four administrators and four teachers were selected to be part of the second phase of the project. You will be interviewed in person and the interview is expected to take approximately one hour to complete. You will receive a \$25 gift card upon completion of the interview.

This research will be used as part of a joint research project, which will fulfill requirements of a doctoral program from the University of Nebraska Lincoln. The study is timely and has the opportunity to provide valuable information to Nebraska educational leaders as Nebraska continues its transition in assessment philosophy.

Your identity will be kept confidential in this project. Results of the study will be published in a doctoral dissertation, but no participants will be identified. Participation in the survey will be voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with UNL or the researchers.

A follow-up email will be distributed notifying participants of the completion of the project. You will be provided contact information for the researchers should you want to receive a summary of the findings of the study.

Thank you very much for your assistance,

Mrs. Jamie Isom ([jisom@esu17.org](mailto:jisom@esu17.org))

Mr. Mike Teahon ([mteahon@esu10.org](mailto:mteahon@esu10.org))

Dr. Jodi Isernhagen ([jisernhagen3@unl.edu](mailto:jisernhagen3@unl.edu))

**Appendix N**

**Phase II Follow-up 2 for Invitation to Interview**



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IRB # 20110912010 EX and 20110911924 EX

Dear Educator,

This is a final reminder asking for your participation in a follow-up interview regarding assessment in Nebraska, your perceptions of the transition from STARS to NeSA and the influence of that shift on implementation of a balanced assessment system. As part of that survey completion process, you indicated your willingness to be considered for the interview portion of the study. You have been selected for the Phase II interview.

Four administrators and four teachers were selected to be part of the second phase of the project. You will be interviewed in person and the interview is expected to take approximately one hour to complete. You will receive a \$25 gift card upon completion of the interview.

This research will be used as part of a joint research project, which will fulfill requirements of a doctoral program from the University of Nebraska Lincoln. The study is timely and has the opportunity to provide valuable information to Nebraska educational leaders as Nebraska continues its transition in assessment philosophy.

Your identity will be kept confidential in this project. Results of the study will be published in a doctoral dissertation, but no participants will be identified. Participation in the survey will be voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with UNL or the researchers.

A follow-up email will be distributed notifying participants of the completion of the project. You will be provided contact information for the researchers should you want to receive a summary of the findings of the study.

Thank you very much for your assistance,

Mrs. Jamie Isom ([jisom@esu17.org](mailto:jisom@esu17.org))

Mr. Mike Teahon ([mteahon@esu10.org](mailto:mteahon@esu10.org))

Dr. Jodi Isernhagen ([jisernhagen3@unl.edu](mailto:jisernhagen3@unl.edu))

**Appendix O**

**Phase II Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement**



**Confidentiality Agreement  
Transcription Services**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audiotapes and documentation received from Jamie Isom related to his doctoral study on "Perceptions of Nebraska Educators Regarding the Transition from STARS to NeSA and its Perceived Influence on the Implementation of a Balanced Assessment System." Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audio-taped interviews, or in any associated documents;
2. To not make copies of any audiotapes or computerized files of the transcribed interview texts, unless specifically requested to do so by Jamie Isom;
3. To store all study-related audiotapes and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession;
4. To return all audiotapes and study-related documents to Jamie Isom in a complete and timely manner.
5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any backup devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which I will have access.

Transcriber's name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Transcriber's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix P**

**Institutional Review Board Approval**

**Sent By:** IRB NUgrant System  
**Sent On:** 09/08/2011 03:54 pm  
**Reference:** Workflow - 69465  
**Subject:** Official Approval Letter for IRB project #11924  
**Message:**

September 8, 2011

Jamie Isom  
Department of Educational Administration

Jody Isernhagen  
Department of Educational Administration  
132 TEAC, UNL, 68588-0360

IRB Number: 20110911924 EX

Project ID: 11924

Project Title: Perceptions of Nebraska Educators Regarding the Transition from STARS to NeSA and its Perceived Influence on the Implementation of a Balanced Assessment System (Parallel study conducted in conjunction with a study by Michael Teahon)

Dear Jamie:

This letter is to officially notify you of the approval of your project by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. It is the Board's opinion that you have provided adequate safeguards for the rights and welfare of the participants in this study based on the information provided. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46) and has been classified as Exempt Category 2.

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Final Approval: 09/08/2011.

1. The approved informed consent forms have been uploaded to NUgrant (files with -Approved.pdf in the file name). Please use these forms to distribute to participants. If you need to make changes to the informed consent forms, please submit the revised forms to the IRB for review and approval prior to using them.

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- \* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- \* Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- \* Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- \* Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- \* Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 472-6965.

Sincerely,

Becky R. Freeman, CIP  
for the IRB

