

HAS IMPLEMENTATION OF NEBRASKA'S STATE STANDARDS
ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM LED TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PRACTICES AS
PERCEIVED BY NEBRASKA TEACHERS IN REPORTING
AND NON-REPORTING GRADES?

by

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Nebraska's standards reporting system is the School-based, Teacher-led, Assessment Reporting System (STARS). This refers to each Nebraska school district's standards accountability and reporting process. The purpose of this study was to compare the perceptions of Nebraska second grade teachers (a non-reporting grade for state accountability) with the perceptions of Nebraska fourth grade teachers (a reporting grade for state accountability) regarding the effects of STARS on school improvement.

The study was not intended to provide a judgment on the effectiveness of the STARS process. The perceptions studied are relevant to any accountability system that included some grades and not others for reporting.

This quantitative study surveyed public school teachers in Nebraska second and fourth grades. The research questions investigated if there was a difference in perceptions of second grade teachers and fourth grade teachers as to whether or not the implementation of the STARS process has impacted the following school improvement practices: student

achievement, improved school curriculum, improved school climate, improved classroom instruction, improved assessment practice, improved image of the teaching profession.

The results of the study found no statistically significant differences between the responses of the second grade teachers and the fourth grade teachers in the research questions. Teachers responding to the survey perceive STARS as a component of school improvement. The response to the research questions also indicate that a common perception of STARS may be isolated to certain classrooms, buildings, and districts. The findings of this study would indicate STARS has impacted teachers to perceive accountability as a school improvement practice.

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PREVIEW

Chapter 1

Introduction

The initial goal for standards and accountability in Nebraska was to guide instruction and promote school improvement. The standards-wide accountability process in Nebraska is the School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS).

The rationale for standards and the subsequent assessment of student achievement on those standards was to provide a catalyst for school improvement. One measure of the impact of standards and accountability in Nebraska is the role it plays in school-wide conversations regarding school improvement.

The underlying philosophy of STARS, as stated by the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE), emphasizes a partnership between local school districts and the NDE. This partnership promotes local decision-making regarding student achievement to remain at the local level with guidance from the NDE. Partnership and balance are the two crucial elements for school improvement that will result in improved learning for all students (STARS, 2002).

Standards-based accountability represented a significant paradigm shift for school reform efforts because of its emphasis on outputs as opposed to inputs. While schools have traditionally defined accountability in terms of effort and opportunity, policymakers are now holding schools accountable for results (Lashaway, 2000).

Statement of the Problem

The effectiveness of standards for accountability depends greatly on the perceptions of teachers and principals. One perception can be that STARS is primarily a reporting and compliance activity. Another perception could be that STARS is a guide for instruction and school improvement. Schools are left with two contrasting messages regarding standards assessment: standards as a basis for school improvement and standards as a compliance activity. The interpretation and implementation of those messages will define a school's priorities and actions.

Since 2000, all Nebraska public school districts have reported annually on progress toward meeting state standards in math and reading in grades 4, 8, and 11. The passage of *The No Child Left Behind Act* in 2001 (NCLB) resulted in the addition of grades 3, 5, 6, and 7 in the reporting of at least one standard in math and reading (STARS, 2007).

The reporting grades for federal accountability include the third grade through eighth grade and at least one grade in the high school. Reporting grades for STARS include the fourth, eighth, and eleventh grades. Kindergarten, first, and second grade do not report student achievement to either the Nebraska Department of Education for STARS or federal accountability (No Child Left Behind).

Are the intended results of STARS reflected in perceptions of teachers regardless of class assignment? If STARS is a part of a school-wide improvement process to improve instruction and achievement, there should be little difference in perceptions between teachers in reporting grades and non-reporting grades. If STARS is perceived as

primarily a compliance activity, teachers may feel removed from the process, unaware and indifferent to the results. If STARS is perceived as a school improvement activity, teachers will relate STARS to school improvement practice in the classroom.

Nebraska teachers could be divided into two groups: those that report student achievement results to the NDE and those that do not. Does teacher perception of STARS differ between these groups? A survey to gauge perceptions would give insight into the question of whether STARS is perceived to be primarily about compliance or about school improvement. Second grade teachers would provide an insight into teachers' perceptions of STARS of those who are not directly involved in reporting student achievement results to the Nebraska Department of Education. Fourth grade teachers represent the heart of the STARS process in the elementary grades. Fourth grade teachers embody the group responsible for all state reading and math standards and subsequent reporting.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this quantitative study is to compare the perceptions of Nebraska second grade teachers (a non-reporting grade) with perceptions of Nebraska fourth grade teachers (a reporting grade) regarding the effect of Nebraska's standards accountability system (STARS) on school improvement practices.

Definitions of Terms

Assessment—Assessment is the process to measure student achievement within the scope of the curriculum. The most effective classroom practices occur when instruction and assessment match the intended curriculum outcomes.

Assessment Literacy—Assessment literacy is the level of knowledge and the expertise in using effective assessment strategies, methods. Matching the learning variable to the correct assessment method will provide the most reliable achievement data. The appropriate use of assessment data to inform all stakeholders and to modify practice is also an element of assessment literacy.

Curriculum—Curriculum refers to the intended scope and sequence of learning experiences within a subject or content area. Instruction refers to the delivery of the curriculum by the teacher to the student.

Curriculum alignment refers to the connection of the intended scope and sequence of learning experiences to an assessment. When an assessment is not aligned with a curriculum, the results may not be indicative of actual achievement levels

School Culture—A school's culture is the traditions, values, and learning climate embedded in the school. Healthy and sound school cultures have an impact on student achievement, motivation, and teacher productivity. School climate includes school goals, academic recognition, sense of purpose, and capacity to manage change.

School Improvement—School improvement is an intentional process to identify issues or problems needing modification to promote increased learning. All Nebraska schools are required to have an identified school improvement process identified and to be actively pursuing strategies to meet school improvement goals centered on student achievement.

STARS—Nebraska's standards reporting system is the School-based, Teacher-led, Assessment Reporting System (STARS). This refers to each Nebraska school district's

standards accountability and reporting process. Districts have the option of adopting the Nebraska state academic standards or alternate local standards. STARS process refers to either the state or locally adopted standards.

Each Nebraska district is required to have assessments that measure student achievement on content standards. The assessment process is reviewed by the Nebraska Department of Education to evaluate quality.

Student Achievement and Progress—Achievement refers to the relationship to a fixed target of proficiency and a student's current level of proficiency. A student's score on an assessment in comparison to the cut score marking proficiency or non-proficiency typically measures achievement.

Progress refers to the fluidity of a student's performance in relationship to a fixed mark of achievement. A student may show significant academic progress yet not be a proficient level of achievement. A student may also show little academic progress but still be performing at or above the proficient level of achievement.

Significance of the Study

STARS was intended to provide a system to set challenging academic standards. Part of this process was a system of standards assessment to measure student progress in order to modify and guide instruction. The level of understanding of the assessment process and the subsequent use of that information will have little effect if only utilized in the reporting grades. Everyone that has a responsibility in the standards process in Nebraska needs a common understanding of the intent and consequences of STARS.

Understanding the perceptions of teachers in reporting and non-reporting grades may help answer the question of the success of the standards movement in Nebraska. If teachers in the reporting and non-reporting grades do not share an understanding of the purpose of STARS as a catalyst for school improvement, the STARS process will not provide systemic reform.

PREVIEW

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

The review of literature will be divided into three main sections. The first section will address the definition and purpose of standards. The second section will review standards and their impact on traditional school improvement efforts from a national perspective. The third section will review Nebraska's STARS model of standards accountability.

Definitions and Purpose

Definitions of Standards

Two definitions of standards-based education dominate the literature. One definition describes a policy approach and does not address instruction specifically. The other definition primarily emphasizes sweeping reforms in teaching and learning, consistent with the recommendations of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and other reform groups (Trumbull & Farr, 2000).

In the definition of standards as a policy approach, standards-based education entails education based on three criteria. First, goals for student learning incorporate broad descriptions of knowledge and skills that students should acquire for a given content area. Second, specific descriptions of student performance indicate mastery of a given content area. Third, the assessment process provides feedback about student performance relative to learning and performance goals (McLaughlin & Shepard, 1995; McREL, 2000; Shepard, 2005).

The definition of standards as a basis for instructional change incorporates constructivist ideas about learning, including student-centered pedagogy, active learning, and cooperative grouping structures, rather than more traditional teacher-centered classroom discourse (Snow-Renner, 2001; Thompson, 2003). Standards documents by the NCTM (1989, 1991, 2000) and the National Research Council (2002) called for a shift in the way content was taught, emphasizing higher-level skill development and deeper understanding of concepts.

Purpose of Standards

Standards are mandated by both state and federal law, but why are standards important? Ravitch (1995) explains that standards are a logical necessity because people cannot accomplish what they do not know they are trying to accomplish. She observed that federal involvement in the standards movement was due to the failure of educators to agree about what students should learn, leaving these decisions to interest groups and textbook publishers.

Another purpose of standards involves the raising of intellectual rigor. Sandholtz, Ogawa, and Scribner (2004) noted that academic standards are intended to create more intellectually rigorous content and more effective instruction that will lead to improved quality of education for all students. Wheelock (1995) and McClure (2005) found when academic standards emphasize the development of students' thinking skills and teaching for understanding there is an increase in student achievement.

Equity is a recurrent theme in proponents' discussions of standards. A common set of standards for all children in all schools was expected to equalize education

opportunities and, as a result, close the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children (Sandoltz et al., 2004; Buttram & Waters, 1997; McClure, 2005). Thus, standards can provide a common set of clear expectations for all students with the assumption that their implementation will result in an improved system of education and higher student achievement.

A broad coalition of constituencies have embraced standards-based reform as a means of improving public schools' accountability, preparing a globally competitive work force, and decreasing the achievement gap among various racial ethnic groups (Orfield & Wald, 2000).

Standards-based systemic reform and standards-based education are complex constructs, and neither can be accomplished without the other. Teaching and learning cannot change unless they are supported by changes in the education system, such as changes in policies and governance (Massell, Kirst, & Hoppe, 1997). Yet if these policy changes do not reach the classroom in the form of changes in practice, then the benefits of standards-based education cannot be fully realized (Cohen, 1995).

The nearly universal use of state tests to measure achievement is an attempt to move systemic reform to the classroom. The large-scale assessment of standards is attractive to policy makers at the federal and state level. State level assessments as reform models are viewed as relatively inexpensive and relatively quick to implement. The state mandated tests provide highly public and visible results (Linn, 2000).

Standards and Impact

Standards and School Curriculum

Teachers make many decisions about what to teach, and how. One large area the majority of research has targeted is the influence of a state test on the focus of instruction and pedagogical methods. The results suggest that as stakes increase the curriculum will narrow to closely resemble the content sampled by the test (Corbett & Wilson, 1991; Madaus, 1998; Smith, 1991).

State-level studies reported teachers were giving greater attention to tested content areas. For example, more than 80% of Virginia teachers surveyed indicated that the state Standards of Learning (SOL) test had affected their instruction (McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 1999), leading the study authors to conclude that “teachers are placing greater emphasis on covering the content of the SOL” (p. 10).

Chance and Anderson (2003) found principals believed standards impacted instruction at a much higher level than teachers. Principals may feel that standards provide more instructional guidance, but that perception is not shared by classroom teachers. Teachers felt emphasis on compliance with bureaucratic rules and regulations did little to change classroom instructional practices.

A study involving teachers from Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit found that while teachers indicated a high level of awareness of standards it did not drive classroom performance. The farther standards and accountability are from the classroom, the less chance for change. The district accountability policies that were designed to raise

standardized test scores had a much more significant impact on classroom practice (Sunderman & Kim, 2001).

Mathers and King (2001) found that teachers in Colorado perceived high levels of personal accountability in matters of curriculum and instructional choices. The teachers also felt a higher level of accountability for their own classroom and less accountable for the performance of the building. Efficacy seemed to have an impact on acceptance of accountability.

The effect of standards and curriculum content is often debated. The narrowing of curriculum to the extent of standards has been identified in Texas by McNeil (2000), “the content is watered down and fragmented, arranged to fit the upcoming test rather than bridge students into college prep levels of the subjects” (p. 247).

The practice of narrowing the curriculum to the extent of the state test is most often reported in schools that are predominantly poor and with children of color. Test preparation courses have replaced course content and students are required to attend these courses to increase the chance of success on the state test (Nelson, McGhee, Meno, & Slater, 2007).

A critical part of using assessment information to improve student performance is in the selection of instructional strategies. Bandalus (2004) found 91% of Nebraska teachers surveyed responded that STARS data would impact instructional decisions. The most frequent form of teacher involvement in STARS has been in the alignment of curriculum and in developing and scoring assessments. However, that represented less than half of teachers responding. Twenty-one percent of teachers responded that

involvement took the form of student remediation. The same percentage indicated involvement in STARS portfolio work. The universal involvement of Nebraska teachers has not been documented.

Hill (2000) gathered qualitative data to study a school district in Massachusetts undergoing a curriculum development process designed to align state math standards with local curriculum. In particular, Hill described and analyzed the work of state-local policy reconciliation and evaluated the work's implications for reform efforts that rely on language as a medium for communication. Hill found that the lack of a common professional language subverted the systemic reform process.

State tests are designed to evaluate student achievement on given state standards. A nation-wide survey of 12,000 teachers from across the K-12 spectrum were asked if an alignment existed between the state test and school curriculum and instruction. Elementary teachers held the most positive view of state standards, but were less certain about the alignment of curriculum and instruction when compared to secondary educators. However, a majority of all teachers were positive regarding state standards and saw an alignment between standards and the school curriculum (Pedulla, Abrams, Madaus, Russell, Ramos, & Miao, 2003).

The literature suggested that standards have impacted school curriculum in four areas. First, standards changed the way curriculum is constructed. A conscious effort to align standards with curriculum is an expected curriculum development outcome. Second, standards have impacted the content of curriculum. The effort to provide test preparation activities is an example of content modification. Standards have changed

curriculum from a vague road map of classroom experiences to a detailed plan to compliment the state test. Finally, standards have affected the use of curriculum in the classroom. The pacing of instruction and the choices of curricular concentrations can be attributed to standards and accountability measures.

Standards and Classroom Instruction

Increased attention to tested content has often led to decreased emphasis on non-tested areas. A study in Arizona reported that teachers placed less emphasis on non-tested subjects such as social studies and science, while giving greater attention to the tested subject areas of English and mathematics (Smith, 1991). In Kentucky, 87% of teachers surveyed agreed with the statement that the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS) had caused some teachers neglect untested subject area (Barron, Mitchell, Koretz, & Stecher, 1996).

In the state of Washington, teachers' views corroborate this trend. Stecher, Barron, Chun, and Ross (2000) found that elementary teachers had increased instructional time spent on tested subjects and decreased time devoted to non-tested content in response to the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). The researchers found that the fourth grade teachers involved in the study spent 63% of their instructional time on tested areas (e.g., reading, writing, and mathematics).

Instructional decisions such as content selection and pacing is influenced by the content of a state test. Teachers may alter the sequencing of the curriculum to ensure that they cover content most likely to appear on the state test. The natural, logical structures of subject matter and the developmental stages of the learner, including psychological

principles of development, are not primary considerations (Herman & Golan, 1993; Jones, Jones, Hardin, Chapman, Yarborough, & Davis, 1999; Zenger & Wenger, 2002).

The connections between assessment results and instruction show a positive relationship to achievement (Stiggins, 2005). The value in linking results to instruction is determined by the value a teacher places on the assessment data. The meaningfulness and relevance of assessment data to a teacher impacts the effort and motivation to use that data to guide instructional decisions (Lane, Parke, & Stone, 1998).

Teachers perceive large-scale assessments as lacking in sufficient detail to warrant instructional changes. Teachers favor data that is closely linked to classroom activities and specific classroom responsibilities (Guskey, 2007).

The use of state tests is generally viewed as a measure of student achievement. Does a state test measure student achievement over time? Research would indicate that scores on a state test are not linked to lasting achievement (Haney, 2000). In the same vein, the accumulative effects of NCLB and the subsequent state testing have not shown any significant increase in student achievement (ASCD, 2007).

The type of student skills being measured and how they are measured may impact classroom practice. The intended result of matching instructional practice with standards assessment had an effect in a study of Nebraska teachers. A large majority of teachers (84%) believed the content of courses matched STARS assessments and 51% reported using activities in the classroom that resembled those on the assessments (Bandalus, 2004).