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AUTHOR Christensen, Doug
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ABSTRACT

Educational policy issues must be seen as statements of intention, with the practice issues of accountability kept separate. Accountability should not be juxtaposed to school improvement. Instead, accountability should be defined broadly as doing the things that improve practice so that the intended results can be achieved. If there is no balance in the definition of accountability, then it will merely result in scorekeeping. School improvement must drive the standards and assessment process or control over the positive impact standards will be lost. To improve achievement, standards-based classrooms must precede the assessment process. Because standards, assessment, and accountability form a new paradigm for the educational process, it is important that innovations come from the classroom and move up, rather than from the state moving down. High stakes testing, or external accountability, tends to drive out good practice. To avoid this, the hierarchy of the school system must be reversed to focus on the classroom first. Teachers must be helped to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to define what students should learn, and then they must learn to determine how they will know students have learned what they should. In Nebraska, the state department of education is trying to create a systems approach to standards, assessment, and accountability that rests on local definition of standards. (SLD)

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CCSSO Large Scale Assessment Conference
June 25, 2000

Dr. Doug Christensen, Commissioner of Education
Nebraska Department of Education

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D. Christensen

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Panel Discussion: Policy Perspectives on Assessment (Ways to Better Clarify Assessment Issues Across Governance Organizations)

1. Policy issues are issues about why, what for, and what results or outcomes are to be achieved. Policy questions are questions like:

Why are we doing this?

What's the purpose?

What outcomes or results do we want to achieve?

Using the word "policy" does not carry with it liberalized authority to do anything and call it policy. We must clearly define policy as statements of "intention" leaving separate the practice issues of implementation.

2. Accountability should not be juxtaposed against school improvement. The critical questions about accountability and school improvement are:

Are they compatible?

Are they complementary?

Are they mutually exclusive?

It depends on the definition of accountability. If accountability is defined broadly in terms of doing research-based, validated practices to improve schooling, then it should also be defined as getting the intended results. Accountability, in my opinion, should be broadly defined as doing those things that improve practice so that the intended results can be achieved.

In other words, accountability definitions should achieve a balance of equal focus, equal effort, equal energy, and equal commitment to doing the things that will insure that the results are achieved.

3. If you don't have balance in the definition of accountability, then accountability results in scorekeeping.

In fact, I believe that any attempt to represent results by single event and/or single scores, has a number of negative consequences. One, single event/single score

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practices shut down school improvement or make it irrelevant. Two, accountability becomes a scorekeeping function resulting in the rank ordering of schools. Three, in any activity, it is not the act of keeping score that results in improvement in the activity. For example, my golf game does not get better just because I keep score.

4. A central question of accountability is this: "if we get the results we want, does it really matter what we do?" To me, the answer is unequivocally "YES!" To enlighten this answer, we must first of all define what is a "good school." The simplest definition that I can offer you for a good school is this: First, the graph of overall achievement will be highly skewed to the right, meaning that 70-80 percent of the students, will be getting the results that were intended. Second, a "good school" would not only be defined as being heavily skewed to the right or high levels of achievement by most students, the achievement line for every subgroup would be a mirror of the achievement of the whole group. In other words, the achievement for males vs. females, individuals of color, race or ethnicity, various poverty levels, and various levels of disability, would mirror the overall achievement line of the whole student group.

5. School improvement has to drive the standards and assessment process. Otherwise, we lose control or the potential of the positive impact that standards may have. School improvement is a systems approach where standards, their implementation, and the development of data for assessment are a systems approach and not a linear approach. Again, a linear approach moves from standards to assessment to accountability, producing heavy pressure and emphasis on assessment and accountability, which when it becomes scorekeeping causes the assessment and accountability function to be the central part of the system. Standards should be the core of the school improvement process.

When assessment is a single measure, top down activity, and results in a single score, the result is, at best, assessment driven reform and, at worst, test driven reform.

6. If we want improved achievement, it is critical that we do a number of things. One, define what it is that we want students to know and be able to do and teachers to teach. The next step is then getting the standards into the classrooms. We must create standards-based classrooms. And standards-based classrooms must precede the assessment process.

What is a standards-based classroom? There seems to me to be at least six principles that would frame a standards-based classroom and differentiate it from a traditional classroom.

- Everything--planning, creation, delivery, assessment, and evaluation--begins with the end in standards mind.
- Content is never an outcome. Content is a vehicle to an outcome.
- Assessment is never an event. It is integrated into instruction and self-assessment becomes a student skill to be mastered.
- Standards are the framework for conversations for building and for creating. The conversations, the building and the creating, are all about students and their learning.
- Equity of opportunity drives decisions as to instructional activities, materials, and strategies to be implemented.
- Equity of outcomes in the measure of success.

7. It is imperative we remember that standards, assessment and accountability are a new paradigm for the educational process. Whenever new paradigms appear on the scene, "shift happens." And, one of the basic corollaries of a paradigm shift is that "everyone goes to zero." "Everyone goes to zero," means that old ways, linear thinking, no longer work. Two, it means that the best strategy for defining the new paradigm in terms of implementation is a ready-fire-aim approach. I think it is important for us to remember that it is not trespassing to step outside of the boundaries of our conventional ways of thinking.

8. What are some of those new ways in which we must begin to think? One, if we want outcomes to be educational in nature and not regulatory in nature, it is important that they begin in the classroom and come from our classrooms and schools up, rather than our state down. State mandated standards, state mandated assessments, state mandated accountability are pure regulation. If we want education to be the centerpiece of what it is that we are all about, and not regulation or compliance, it means that we must foster strategies that are classrooms up, that build and honor local leadership and discretion, that focus on school improvement and do nothing that inhibits the school improvement process.

Secondly, high stakes testing or external accountability tends to drive out good practices. Some are driven out by design; some are driven out by default. The

existence of a state test will almost insure that any school or district-based assessment will be narrowed to the state test. Likewise, any classroom assessment will be narrowed to the state test. The degrading of the curriculum begins with the adage that "what gets measured, gets done." With the state test, particularly those in which high stakes consequences are combined with the results of the testing, insidiously begins the degrading process by forcing out or making irrelevant those things that are not part of the state assessment plan. Those things that are irrelevant eventually erode and fall away. The system of education becomes "shrink-wrapped" in its regulation through the testing process.

9. If our goal is to get standards-based classrooms to precede the assessment process, we need to do at least three things in order to create standards-based classrooms. First, we must invert the hierarchy of our schools. At the local level, the hierarchy begins at the top with the local board of education, the superintendent and his/her staff, then we move to the principals and their staffs, and then at the bottom are the classrooms. The hierarchy is even deeper because on top of the local level, we have the state departments of education, state boards of education, chief state school officers, legislatures, and governors.

How are standards intended to penetrate a hierarchy at the state level and local level and get down into the classroom without being distorted and without having a chilling effect upon what teachers do? For me, I want the people who define standards, assessment and accountability to be the people who see the faces of children when they talk about what students are to know and be able to do and for what we are going to hold them accountable. I think we must recognize that learning occurs in the classrooms, not legislatures, not governors' offices, not state boards of education rooms, and not commissioners' offices or those of state superintendents. Inverting the hierarchy would place the classroom at centerstage. Classrooms would be supported by the principals, principals would be supported by superintendents, superintendents would be supported by board, and the whole local structure would be supported by the state level policy partnership. It might be better to conceive of such a relationship as a series of concentric circles with the classroom being at the center and the levels of support branching out from it.

Secondly, in order to create standards-based classrooms, we must help teachers develop two very powerful tools. One, teachers need the knowledge, skill and attitudes to define what it is students should learn, i.e., what they should know and what they should be able to do. It is powerful to begin planning and the delivery of instruction

and the assessment instruction clearly knowing the answer to the question, what should students learn? The second most powerful tool is the knowledge, skill and attitudes to be able to answer the question "how do I know my students know what they are supposed to know?" I have known few teachers who would not change their behavior, change instructional content, change instructional strategies, or change the time allotted, change most anything when presented with evidence that their students are not learning what they are supposed to learn.

Third, we must adopt a strategy of continuous professional development and the training, education and support of our classroom teachers.

10. A policy issue that should nag us all is one that is quite common: "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." I am not sure that I know all the parts that must connect standards, assessment and accountability. I am sure of some of them. I am sure of some of them that must be present and I am sure of others that must not be present. I have some instincts about some of those that are required, but now unknown, because the paradigm has shifted.

I am always on guard because of a nagging notion that tells me that there is a formula out there that we must never forget. That formula is: " $X - 1 = 0$." "X" stands for the whole. One of those essential parts, if missing, renders the entire equation equal to zero. I believe standards, assessment and accountability are just such an equation.

11. Finally, in Nebraska, we are trying to create something different based upon a systems approach to standards, assessment and accountability. We are trying to develop:

- State-wide standards that are locally defined
- A state-wide system of school and classroom based assessment
- Accountability that is shared at all levels
- Putting the policy tools in the hands of practitioners by being clear about our outcomes at the policy level and letting professional determine the practice.



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