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North Dakota Study Group

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Three snapshots from the road less traveled:

Snapshot 1:

Suzanne and fourth-grader Micah sit side-by-side in the computer lab, literally comparing notes. Suzanne explains how she has filled out a rubric for Micah's research project. Micah explains his answers to the questions on the self-assessment form: "I learned that…" "My resources were…" "Next time, I will…" As he talks, Suzanne scans the room. Several students sit at computers doing online research. John is meeting with the resource teacher; Sam is meeting with the speech pathologist. Sarah practices her presentation for Beth. Jordan and Liz work on their poster boards. Melanie shows Luis pictures of the wedding dresses she will use as sensors for her oral presentation; Luis reciprocates by telling her about his culture's traditions.

It is chaos. Suzanne smiles.

Snapshot 2:

The cafeteria hums with unfocused, coffee-fueled early-morning energy as teachers move to tables, set up in rounds. The chatter is slow to die down, but then, seemingly all at once, the tables are covered with folders, papers, pencils, pens, laptops. Conversations find their table-level pitch. From several tables: "Who wants to start?" "Who's taking notes this time?"

At one table, Marie begins. Dave takes notes. Marie describes a poetry assessment she has designed. She explains that she wants her students to have language to describe what poems are doing. But she isn't happy, she says, with the kids' performance.

Suddenly, from her tablemates: "Are they getting caught up on the same terms, or different ones?" "Are the girls performing differently from the boys?" "What strategies have you used to teach the terms?" "Why a pencil-and-paper test?" "Do they use the terms in class, when they discuss readings?"

Several of these questions prompt brief discussions and suggestions from the group. Dave scribbles away.

After fifteen minutes, Jean sums up: "Sounds like you have some work to do and some ideas for how to do it. They're having a tough time with this, but like we said last time, they are getting stronger overall."

Marie thanks the group, says she has some ideas for how to "go at this again."

Dave hands Marie the sheet of notes and says, "I'll go next."

Snapshot 3:

A warm spring evening. The stifling auditorium is filled almost to capacity. Half of this town of 1000 people must be in attendance tonight.

Ms. B., a high school teacher with a powerful voice and a pleasant demeanor, takes the microphone and announces the theme of the evening: storytelling. All the student projects to be shared this evening, she says, are a part of the history of the town, the story of its people. "And oh," she adds, as if she had almost forgotten, "these

projects also meet state standards. We teachers will be happy to share with you the assessments we created to measure student learning."

She turns over the stage to a group of elementary-aged students who squeak out the poetry of local writers and stutter through their research into the lives of the town founders. They are followed by middle school students displaying the "immigrant trunks" they made by hand, modeled on those of their nineteenth-century ancestors. They have filled their immigrant trunks with historical artifacts, each one prompting a story: some sweet—newfound love on the prairie—others less so: racial and ethnic tension on the plains. One student quotes her teacher, who says that in order to know your heritage, you must learn both to celebrate it and critique it.

By the time the highschoolers begin their impressive, multimedia presentations of their math-science-social studies projects on weather patterns and their consequences for the local economy, the audience – parents, local business people and other community members, assorted invited guests – are charmed, rapt. Mostly, they sit in silent wonder. But occasionally, they turn to a neighbor and whisper: "I could never have done that at that age" or "I didn't know that" or "Remind me to tell you about the time…."

As the evening concludes with thunderous applause and a standing ovation that extends well beyond what decorum requires, Ms. B. asks the guests to provide written feedback so the staff and kids can plan for next year. She concludes with a final thought. Knowing your history means knowing how your story intersects with the stories of others within and beyond your community. This is the key to living well anywhere.

Consider these snapshots of Nebraska schools drawn from research my colleagues and I have conducted for a university-based evaluation of STARS and from my own visits to schools as an invited guest. Do you see the family resemblance?

For me, what's most important about each of these moments is the almost-but-not-quite-frantic energy with which kids, teachers, parents, and community members are *building relationships*. There is in each moment a sense of excitement, even wonder, born of sharing something real, something meaningful.

And this, amazingly enough, is what statewide assessment looks like in a growing majority of Nebraska schools. Teachers like Suzanne and kids like Micah are co-investigating teaching and learning through classroom assessment instead of stopping their wonderful, furious activity to take sterile, standardized state tests. Educators like Marie and her colleagues are teaching their curriculum and designing and revising assessments that can best help them improve their instruction and kids' learning, rather than doing the bidding of some remote bureaucracy or profiteering testing industry. Educators like Ms. B., her students, and her colleagues are enacting community engagement through sharing rich, place-based education, instead of sacrificing their unique curriculum on the altar of standardization. These stimulating, learning rich activities are not only protected but enhanced by classroom assessment. And they are happening every day across the state of Nebraska. Choosing the assessment road less traveled in Nebraska has, as the poet writes, made all the difference.

In my book *Reclaiming Assessment*, I argue that this difference is not really about assessment; it's about creating and enacting an alternative vision for teaching and learning. Sure, Nebraskans are doing interesting things with assessment. But what I

think it really offers to the world—and to the group of progressive educators assembled here today—is a hopeful agenda for democratic schooling. This agenda—I call it the *engagement agenda*—is about as far from the prevailing test-based accountability agenda as we can get. [**SLIDE: ACCOUNTABILITY/ ENGAGEMENT CHART**]

Two Education Agendas

Accountability	**Engagement**
Business model	Democratic model
One-way relationships	Mutual relationships
Teachers impediments to reform	Teachers leaders of school improvement
Standardization	Standards
Stern father morality	Shared responsibility ethic
Transaction	Interaction
Top down	Inside out
Compliance	Commitment
Exert control	Build capacity
High-stakes tests	High-impact assessment
Assessment *of* learning (only)	Assessment *for* learning (also)
Unearned distrust	Earned trust
Competition	Collaboration

--Adapted from Chris W. Gallagher, *Reclaiming Assessment* (Heinemann 2007)

In brief, the accountability agenda is premised on a business model (accounting) and predicated on market logic. In theory, it is about getting what you pay for and paying for what you get; in practice, it means trading tax dollars for test scores. With an eye always on the bottom line, we seek to leverage results by implementing standard metrics, putting schools in competition, and imposing sanctions on underperformers. This is school reform as *trans*action. Key terms: control, compliance.

By contrast, the engagement agenda is premised on a democratic model and predicated on egalitarian logic. It replaces the *trans*actional model with an *inter*actional one in which we seek to do what is right by virtue of our relationships with others with

whom we share a common trust, rather than doing only what will profit us and protect our bottom lines. The theory here is that through the building of mutually responsible *relationships*, schools can become what Gerald Bracey calls "democracy's workshops": places where we work on and work out what it means to live well together with diverse others in a multicultural society. Key terms: capacity, commitment.

To those of you who did your homework and read Myles Horton's *The Long Haul*, I hope some of this sounds familiar. To be honest, I hadn't read the book before I dutifully bought it and read it a month or so ago. When I did, I was immediately struck by the parallels between his key ideas and what Nebraskans are trying to do with STARS. I'll devote the balance of this presentation to teasing these out.

I am no Horton expert, but I'd like to draw four key principles for organizing from *The Long Haul* and talk a little bit about how STARS attempts to enact each of them. I make no special claim for these principles beyond that they struck a chord with me and perhaps might strike a similar one with you as we consider together what it means to educate ourselves for organizing and organize ourselves for educating.

1. *Trust "the people" to define and seek solutions to their own problems and to make important decisions regarding how they are governed*

Horton: "It's the kind of thing you just have to posit: you have to have trust in people, and you have to work through it to the place where people respond to that trust. Then you have to believe that people have the capacity within themselves to develop the ability to govern themselves" (8).

If we expect our schools to contribute to the functioning of our democracy, we cannot continue to deny the people who work in and with them the freedom and self-determination required to participate in the decision-making processes that shape their lives. STARS is premised on the idea—as Commissioner Doug Christensen has said a number of times—that the most important decisions about teaching and learning happen in classrooms, not boardrooms or conference rooms. The classroom is at the center of STARS and teachers and kids, in conversation with parents and community members, are the primary decision-makers. The NDE, meanwhile, becomes primarily a support agency, not a wielder of carrots and sticks. Pat, Jan, and their colleagues devote the bulk of their resources not to designing controls—to invoke Linda Darling-Hammond's useful distinction—but to building capacity.

And judging by our six years of research in Nebraska schools, it seems that Horton was right that when people have the experience of making important decisions, they *become* trustworthy. For instance, the strongest finding of our qualitative research has been the enormous growth in teachers' assessment literacy. After some initial resistance, teachers have dedicated themselves to learning how to design and carry out valid and reliable assessments. They have learned about various assessment methods and their purposes, the rudiments of technical assessment quality, how to embed assessment in instruction and curriculum, how to interpret assessment data, and how to use those data for teaching and learning. This has been, as you can imagine, a difficult and time-consuming process. But Nebraska teachers have developed their assessment literacy by taking courses, attending workshops, participating in data retreats, and especially

working together on learning teams, action research projects, inquiry groups, and the like. And why? Because, as we've heard again and again, it's the right thing to do for kids. Here's how one Nebraska teacher puts it [**SLIDE**]:

> I would have said, six years ago--I did say six years ago when I moved here [from Texas]--'Why do we have to do all this? Why don't we just give a state test?'…Now, six years later, I've taken a change because I've seen what kind of information you can gain from tests that are written to your curricula, that you have written and that the teachers have said is important to them… If you can take this information that we're getting based on our test, on our kids, and use it wisely, that it is the way to go. And I wouldn't want to be in any other state right now, even though it's a lot of work.

2. *Grow leadership strategically; empower others to empower others*

   Horton: "The job of Highlander was to multiply leadership" (115).

"To multiply leadership": Perhaps no better phrase captures what Nebraska has done among educators. In Nebraska today, the teachers-teaching-teachers approach has replaced the old practices of sending teachers off to conferences or bringing in an expert. What we see in most schools we visit, in fact, is something like Horton's workshops: groups of people defining and solving problems based on their collective wisdom. Often, as in the example of Marie and her colleagues, this means looking at actual samples of student work and at assessments. This kind of on-the-job, embedded, dialogue-driven professional development, teachers tell us, is far more relevant and useful to them than

any other form of professional development they've received. Indeed, they leave these meetings enfranchised [**SLIDE**]: "I feel as if my voice, it matters, that what I feel is best for students is being brought up in [learning team] meetings and I am able to discuss my opinions with other teachers and we can bounce ideas off one another."

Indeed, we've seen a sea-change in educational leadership in Nebraska schools. No longer school managers, administrators are leaders of learning. No longer classroom managers, teachers are instructional leaders. Here is how many principals now see the roles of teachers and administrators [**SLIDE**]: "You want your teachers to take control and to take the lead in the improvement process. So my role has been…as a supporter…to help make sure that they have the things that they need to be successful and to be able to achieve the goals that they are setting for the school and the district…[You want]…shared leadership."

3. *Define your sacred ground, but be responsive to the situation at hand (*kairos*)—Or, Learn from the Birds*

Horton: "We've changed methods and techniques over the years, but the philosophy and conditions for learning stay the same. There is no method to learn from Highlander. What we do involves trusting people and believing in their ability to think for themselves" (157).

Horton is talking about what the ancient Greeks called "kairos." This term, used in reference to oratory, is associated with timeliness, measure, proportionality, and

appropriateness. Basically, it means being responsive to *context*, taking into account the singular features of the situation at hand, even as we hold to our principles. So we might think of *kairos* as making the right decisions at the right time for the right reasons.

Last October, Commissioner Christensen articulated the sacred ground of STARS for a group of about 250 educators at an annual Leadership for Assessment Conference [**SLIDE**]:

> Seven years ago, we made a promise. We made a promise to *be* accountable not be *held* accountable. We made a promise to stand up for teaching all children and [to leave] no child behind. We made a promise that this work would be led from the local level and from classrooms. We promised that the design and practice of our work would come from the energy, creativity and knowledge of our educators....We promised our public that classrooms would be the center of the school's work and that teaching and learning would be the core of that work. And, we promised that students would be the center of all that we do…These are promises worth keeping . . . this is our moment!

Still, as you know if you've followed Nebraska's public negotiations with the feds or its local politicians, Nebraskans understand as well as anyone that STARS—like any assessment and accountability system—has multiple stakeholders with sometimes competing agendas. Recognizing this, NDE has had to perform a delicate dance to balance the interests of policymakers, educators, and psychometricians, while keeping the interests of students and their families at the forefront.

This has not always been easy, with politicians pulling in one direction, measurement folks in another, and educators in yet another. Commissioner Christensen and his staff have had to make tough decisions all along about when and how to introduce, drop, or revise elements of the system. But STARS is constantly changing. Its technical requirements change to increase technical rigor or to respond to educators' needs. The assessments that make up STARS change as districts refine and improve their local processes. Retooling, then, is happening at all levels of the system.

Again, if you've followed the national news on Nebraska, you know that protecting sacred ground has sometimes led NDE into pitched battle. Other times, it has led to quiet, palatable, if not eager, compromise. And sometimes, it has meant, to borrow from Horton, learning from the birds:

> Birds will take advantage of a tailwind, and when the wind is blowing the other way, they'll hole up. They won't exhaust their strength going against that wind for long when they'd make only a few miles a day or get blown backward. They rest, because if they rest that day and restore their strength, the next day they can much more than make up for what they lost by not going…They [also] change their course year after year on the basis of the particular situation. They never come back exactly the same way twice because the conditions are never the same, but they always get to their destination. They have a purpose, a goal. They know where they are going, but they zigzag and they change tactics according to the situation. (198-99)

This is about as cogent a description of *kairos* as you're likely to find.

4. *Build strong relationships*

Horton:

> If you ever lose track of where people are in the process, then you have no relationship to them and there's nothing you can do. So if you have to make a choice between moving in the direction you want to move people, and working with them where they are, you always choose to work with them where they are. That's the only way you're ever going to be able to work with people and help them, because otherwise you separate yourself from them. (132)

The only way to make a difference that makes a difference is to build relationships premised on respect, common humanity, and empowerment for all. In many ways, this is what Horton's book is about, because this is what will sustain us for the long haul.

Think back with me to the snapshots with which I began this talk. Think of the students—how they discuss their personal and social histories, put their experiences up against others', explore the lives of those who came before them, share what they learn with each other and with significant others, render important judgments about their own learning, and in general learn to live well together amid difference. These, I submit, are the democratic arts of engagement, and they are what will sustain them for the long haul.

By way of conclusion, let me acknowledge that our researchers do not see the democratic arts of engagement in *every* Nebraska school we visit; some persist under the

weight of history and tradition and have not followed the state along the road less traveled. Nor do I want to suggest that STARS is perfect or that Nebraska has all the answers; far from it. But the engagement agenda that drives STARS provides an unrivaled and much needed vision for democratic public education in the 21st century. At its core, it is a vision that seeks to reclaim the profession for teachers, classrooms for students, schools for communities, and education for democracy. I don't know what will happen to STARS in the end, but I do know that this is a vision for the long haul.

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