

Good morning Senator Shapiro, Representative Eissler, and members of the committee. My name is Mark Cantu and I teach 6<sup>th</sup> grade English at Edcouch-Elsa ISD. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak before your committee. We have heard many compelling stories detailing the situations our students are experiencing because of our current accountability system. I would like to offer an alternative that should be considered in order to reform our current system.

### **Introduction**

Nebraska's School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System, known as STARS, emphasizes a partnership between the local school districts and the department of education. Keeping decisions about student performance on state standards at the local classroom level provides a balance between the state level guidance and local decision-making. Partnership and balance are the two crucial elements in making changes in schools that will result in improved learning for all students. This is our goal in education.

In Nebraska, districts align their local curriculum with the state standards. All districts engage staff in the local discussion of curriculum, instruction, and assessments. Each school district is required to submit to the state a district assessment plan that outlines how they plan to measure student performance on the standards. Districts develop, create, and administer multiple on going assessments that match standards. This ensures that the assessment process and instruments used meet rigorous state-established criteria.

Districts submit an assessment plan that includes norm-referenced measures and locally developed criterion referenced measures to assess the state's standards at the identified grade levels. In the spring of each year, districts in Nebraska compile a portfolio of its assessment procedures along with sample assessments and submit them to the state department for review and public rating.

Nebraska's Department of Education requires that districts utilize six quality assessment criteria in order to produce their assessments:

- The assessments reflect the state/local standards.
- Students have the opportunity to learn.
- The assessments are free of bias and insensitive situations.
- The assessments are at the appropriate level.
- The assessments are reliably scored.
- The assessments mastery levels are appropriately set.

### **What is STARS?**

STARS is a statewide assessment system that measures state-approved standards the same way that TAKS measures Texas Essential Knowledge & Skills (TEKS). Tests are administered locally and assess at the point of instruction, rather than at the end of the year as our current test. STARS connects curriculum, instruction, and assessment and generates data for school improvement continuously throughout the academic year. Therefore, teachers can tailor instruction accordingly.

### **Why Can It Be Trusted?**

The classroom-based assessment used in STARS is reviewed and rated by an external team of national assessment experts. This will ensure that our locally developed tests are valid and reliable. These tests will not be watered-down. They will be based upon rigorous technical standards of validity and reliability. STARS is benchmarked against national standardized tests. Therefore, when we reform our accountability system, we need to benchmark our test to validate that our students are being challenged to a national level.

### **How Has It Been Effective?**

STARS has contributed to increased student performance averages. Nebraska has seen their state scores in all tested areas rise from the low 70's to high 80's. Also, the tests have better prepared students for national tests. Results have also shown increased national test scores in American College Testing (ACT) among other norm-reference tests.

### **Building Capacity**

The STARS accountability system would not be successful without the capacity building approach in which the state took part. They trained their regional education service centers, who in turn trained administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders. It is imperative that we utilize our regional education service centers and model after STARS. Empowering our administrators and teachers through training will result in assessments that more accurately portray our students' learning.

### **Conclusion**

We need to develop a system that uses the ideas in Nebraska's statewide assessment structure, which is based upon school improvement, has its foundation in the classroom, and provides public accountability. As you have heard from our testimonies today, TAKS is not what is best for students. Thus, it is necessary we drastically reform our accountability system to do what is best for students. As Roschewski, Isernhagen, and Dappen wrote in their evaluation of STARS. "This process honors teachers and relies on their professional judgment, but it also demands hard work and a great deal of leadership from all of the state's educators." Keep this quote in mind when reforming our accountability system and doing what is right for our students. Again, thank you for allowing me to speak before you today.