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Book Review: *Reclaiming Assessment: A Better Alternative to the Accountability Agenda* By Chris W. Gallagher

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Reclaiming Assessment: A Better Alternative to the Accountability Agenda. By Chris W. Gallagher. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007. xiv + 144 pp. Figures, notes, references, index. \$18.50 paper.

Chris Gallagher's description of Nebraska's School-based, Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System

(STARS) is a very thoughtful participant-observer account of the state's unique response to the call for accountability in the No Child Left Behind legislation. As a researcher charged with supporting and evaluating the STARS effort, Gallagher outlines principles that have guided the STARS process, including local control, teacher leadership, professional development, community engagement, and student engagement in meaningful classroom assessment. But it is his use of narrative "portraits of practice" that gives a sense of what this Nebraska effort really means for stakeholders, from students and teachers to administrators and community members.

Many of these portraits make clear that a key premise of STARS is "that assessment is an instructional tool, not a policy tool." Vignettes of students, teachers, parent teacher conferences, and community meetings vividly capture the kind of engagement that STARS has begun to engender. Gallagher emphasizes that by avoiding the ranking inevitable in a statewide test, schools have been free to compete with *themselves*, seeking the next stage of growth, rather than to rest on comparisons with others. He reviews Nebraska's six quality criteria, a refreshingly meaningful set of guides to instruction and assessment, and frankly describes the struggles that schools are engaging in as they shift toward a culture of collaborative work and professional conversation. And the book clearly has value beyond the Cornhusker State; as Gallagher notes, "Nebraska is pushing the psychometric community to engage teacher-designed classroom assessment."

Gallagher makes explicit how making meaning of assessment across stakeholders (for example, through students publicly sharing the results of their learning in portfolios or in exhibitions at community meetings) contrasts with test-based accountability—"at best beside the point and at worst a threat to the good things happening in [schools]." In a telling chart on page 29, he contrasts two notions of school reform—one based on accountability, the other on engagement; this chart is mirrored in another on page 58, contrasting views of assessment from the same two perspectives.

As I write this review, the Nebraska unicameral legislature has passed into law a new, uniform statewide system of testing, triggering the resignation of Nebraska Commissioner of Education Douglas D. Christensen and undoing the STARS effort. While I agree with Christensen who called the move "the most horrible public policy we could ever put in place," I think that the STARS effort, so vividly documented in this book, provides the blueprint we will need when the test-based accountability movement crashes, as I believe it inevitably will. The

accountability movement represented by a reliance on standardized testing will not give us the results we need in the 21st century. Gallagher has captured the "existence proof" of a system that can, and stakeholders—teachers, administrators, policy makers, and psychometricians—should pay attention. **Mary E. Diez**, *School of Education, Alverno College*.