Background
Millard Public Schools (Omaha, NE) encompasses over 24,000 students in PK - 12, and 35 buildings. As the district administrator in charge of the district assessment system, Darin Kelberlau is responsible for ensuring that students have learned the curriculum as they progress through the district and monitoring progress of the district curriculum against state standards.

The Millard Public Schools Assessment System evaluates students through a district-wide assessment system, which is expected to provide a fair and adequate measurement of each student's progress and achievement. The information provided by the assessment system is supported by the Millard Board of Education and district staff to evaluate the progress of students; differentiate instructional strategies; adjust district curriculum; and plan and provide interventions and appropriate support experiences for students. Essential learner outcome assessments must be valid, reliable, and aligned with the curriculum and outcomes in reading, writing, and mathematics. The Millard district assessments are blended with state and national assessments, to establish a well-balanced system.

Moving Towards More Timely, Formative, and Instructionally-Driven Instruments
Historically, Millard Public Schools administered a number of high-stakes, summative assessments. However, the district wanted to evolve their assessment approach to incorporate more timely, formative and instructionally-driven instruments. Like many districts, Millard's assessments were comprised of largely multiple choice, with the exception of an annual writing assessment. It was a challenge for Millard to provide enough human and financial resources to this annual writing assessment to ensure ongoing support and future enhancements.

"We wanted to move towards a more frequent check for the skills kids need to have to be successful after high school. Several of the academic standards are at a rigorous level that are challenging to assess with multiple choice questions alone," said Kelberlau.

Kelberlau's team was focused on not only achievement, but also on student growth. "We were moving toward a growth model with more frequent formative check-ins to complement the summative assessments. With more frequent checks, we can intervene sooner to get them back on track."

Challenges with Incorporating More Performance Assessments
Implementing these performance tasks into the current manual process would be very labor intensive and cost prohibitive. The district's writing assessments consumed weeks of the district staff, teachers', and raters' time and caused delays in getting results back. In one example that Kelberlau provided, "One grade level's
writing assessment was administered in November but we weren’t able to return results back to teachers until February. The delay in returning results back to classrooms drastically decreased the opportunity to impact student learning.” Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, was a concern about maintaining high quality scores while increasing the volume of assessments. “With the amount of assessments we were planning, human error is inevitable. Any time you’re dealing with a large number of people and hard copies, you always run the risk of error,” said Kelberlau.

Maintaining a High Bar in a New System with More Frequent Performance Assessments

Ultimately, the district’s new approach needed to meet four clear requirements; it needed to be:

1) more efficient
2) scalable
3) meaningful for stakeholders
4) within budget

"With authentic type tests, scoring them can be very costly and time consuming. They’re very resource intensive, much more so than multiple choice tests. So we looked at how we can reap the benefits of performance assessments while managing associated constraints on resources," said Kelberlau. "It was apparent that our assessment system needed to match how we were teaching kids, and we needed to do it in a way that was affordable and efficient."

Kelberlau’s team researched ways to transform the current paper scoring to a digital platform. Kelberlau’s background in technology made him naturally interested in looking at ways in which computers equipped with progressive technology could improve upon the historical paper process. “We’re not merely talking about computerizing a paper approach, we’re talking about ways to make it much, much better.” The natural point to start testing a new performance assessment approach was with the district’s well-established writing assessment.

MZD and OSCAR™ Bring Assessment Expertise and Advanced Functionality

Kelberlau’s colleagues connected him with MZD and their product, OSCAR. “We were impressed with OSCAR’s simple user interface, advanced functionality, and pre-built reports. It was also apparent through our conversations that the MZD team possessed deep expertise in writing assessment and scoring as well as technical know-how. The Millard assessment team also has decades of assessment experience in writing scoring, so when they made the decision to move forward into a pilot, it was made with deep understanding of what quality scoring looks like.”

“A Successful Pilot

The Millard Assessment Division initially evaluated OSCAR internally by simulating a scoring scenario with sample students, writing prompts, and rating themselves. After that was successful, the team reviewed the system in a live environment with a few classrooms at one of Millard’s middle schools. This live event went so well that they expanded the evaluation to a full grade level. At that point, they felt confident that this system would work at an even larger scale and they began putting a plan in place to expand the use of OSCAR across the district. “We felt the system provided us more capabilities, and better information, enhanced our system, and increased overall efficiency,” said Kelberlau.

Implementing OSCAR was Easy

The majority of Millard’s professional raters are retired teachers who are not typically digital natives. “I was concerned with how receptive our professional raters would be with the move to an online scoring system. I was very pleased with how quickly our raters adapted to OSCAR and how intuitive it was for them to learn,” said Kelberlau. “The training needed was easy and quick. After using OSCAR the raters didn’t want to go back to bubble sheets. They were hooked!”

OSCAR is More Efficient, Less Costly

Millard is now in their third year using OSCAR and the results are very promising. Annually OSCAR is now being used to score writing assessments in five grade levels for six tests, approximately 8,500 students, and more than 10,200 papers. Kelberlau’s team is currently planning for continued growth of formative performance assessments across the district.

Kelberlau estimates that since incorporating OSCAR his department has reduced his department labor hours by 35%. 
"OSCAR allows us to score typed writing documents and hand-written papers, which is closer to how kids are learning in the classroom, and it allows the raters to score faster," Kelberlau said. In addition, by incorporating rubrics that are easy to access online, the scorers are much more efficient, allowing the department to score significantly more papers per hour.

As an example, before Millard started online scoring with OSCAR, the 10th grade scoring event took 8 FTEs and approximately 400 labor hours (scorers and department staff) to score. After moving to online scoring with OSCAR, the same event took 4 FTEs, and about 288 labor hours. In addition, the district saved 48% in supply costs associated with the event. "Overall, scoring online with OSCAR increased the amount and quality of information we have, increased our efficiency, and decreased our costs," said Kelberlau.

OSCAR Provides Better and Faster Scorer Information

Another benefit of OSCAR is the Reporting Dashboard, which allows Kelberlau's team to monitor raters in real time. "We can now be more efficient at hiring scorers because we can review their speed and accuracy, then determine who and how many we need in order to score the necessary essays." This level of rater information allows them to bring in only the best raters.

Additionally, the insights allow the district to better target professional learning for specific raters. And, if there are rater inconsistencies across the district, they can plan district-wide professional learning. "As a result, our events are becoming higher and higher quality, and we are improving better as an overall system," said Kelberlau.

OSCAR's Platform Helps Train and Develop Raters

OSCAR provides a platform to help train and develop the district’s raters. Training papers are loaded into OSCAR to be scored as a whole group, small group, or individually. Results are real time and drive the next steps for the trainers. Gateway papers are the last step prior to the “live” scoring event. Raters must prove their accuracy by scoring these papers within an acceptable level. "Throughout the entire training and scoring process, we are provided with real-time rater information so that we can provide that same real time professional support for our raters," said Kelberlau.

Going Forward with Expanded Use of OSCAR and OSCAR Classroom

Because of their emphasis on formative assessments in support of student growth, Kelberlau’s team plans to build on their success with the adoption of OSCAR Classroom, MZD’s teacher-based performance assessment platform, and expand across more grade levels. "We will be incorporating OSCAR Classroom into the schools so the teachers can begin to collaborate with each other on the assessment development, assignment of tasks, and scoring of essays. We would love to have teachers and buildings use OSCAR Classroom on classroom tests so that they can check the consistency of student scores, teacher expectations, and use of the rubric," said Kelberlau.
A Partnership that Keeps Getting Stronger

“Our department’s time with MZD and OSCAR has been time really well spent,” said Kelberlau. “It’s a very powerful yet simple tool. MZD’s leadership team really understands education and assessment and they listen to feedback and respond accordingly. They’re always improving the tool; it’s not just a static program that we will outgrow. I feel really good about our decision and the direction MZD is headed.”

The partnership is becoming even stronger over time. “Often, when one enters into a contractual agreement with a vendor, one hopes for a partnership. What we have with MZD is taking that hope to even another level. I have found that the more we discuss performance assessment the more our visions blend. Our partnership is really an ongoing relationship in which we share the same overall purpose: assisting teachers in becoming more efficient so that we improve student learning for all,” said Kelberlau.

More About MZD, Inc.

MZD, Inc. was founded in 2015 in Iowa by a group of individuals who collectively have over 75 years of experience in the online assessment and performance scoring industry. MZD is focused on a single mission: delivering solutions that make performance assessments a reality for organizations of all sizes. The first product, OSCAR, was launched in 2015 and is currently in use with leading districts and test assessment organizations throughout the country. In 2018 OSCAR was won the Audience Success Award at the 2018 ATP Conference’s Innovation Lab. Since then, MZD has expanded its product suite with ADAM™, an assessment authoring, delivery, and management platform, and OSCAR Classroom™, a collaborative teacher-based performance assessment management platform. More information can be found at https://mzdevinc.com.

More About Dr. Kelberlau

Dr. Kelberlau’s career in education spans 25 years, all in Nebraska, as a high school teacher and in a variety of roles in district office. These include technology integration, professional learning, assessment leadership, data coaching, curriculum design & leadership, and program evaluation.

Kelberlau completed the Nebraska Assessment Cohort at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln (UNL), which is an 18-hour graduate program focused on increasing the assessment literacy of teachers and administrators, improving classroom assessment practices, and preparing teachers for leadership roles.

In his current role as the Executive Director of Assessment, Research, and Evaluation for the Millard Public Schools, his major responsibilities include directing the assessment system, collecting / analyzing / interpreting of data, and designing program evaluations.

Dr. Kelberlau holds a Ph.D. in Quantitative, Qualitative, & Psychometric Methods in Education. He has earned a M.S. ED. in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Instructional Technology and a B.A. in Mathematics.

He also is currently an adjunct professor in the department of Educational Administration at the University of Nebraska - Kearney where he teaches graduate courses in assessment leadership.