



Education reform is about the skills, not the test

Why do we require students to demonstrate that they can read, write and do math in order to graduate?

Washington's 1993 education reform law was passed because our schools were awarding high school diplomas to students who couldn't read, write or do math well enough to survive in the job market or college. The graduating class of 2007 will still include students who lack the crucial skills tested by the 10th grade WASL.

Over the past decade, the WASL has helped schools better understand the strengths and weaknesses of their programs, so that they can improve instruction. Since the WASL became a statewide test, student learning has dramatically improved – on the WASL and by many other measures.

- **The U. S. Chamber of Commerce** awarded Washington “A” grades in academic achievement, achievement among low-income and minority students, return on investment, teacher quality and data quality.
- Washington ranks 12th in the nation in fourth-grade math and 8th in the nation in eighth-grade math on the **National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)**. In 2005, Washington's African-American students scored the highest in the nation on the fourth-grade math test and 3rd in the nation on the eighth-grade math test.
- Among states where more than 50% of students took the **SAT**, Washington students earned the highest scores in the nation for the past four years.
- Washington students' 2006 scores on the **ACT** were the third highest in the nation.
- Washington is one of the top three states with gains in the numbers and diversity of students taking and succeeding on the **Advanced Placement (AP)** exams. In 2006, 25,891 seniors took at least one AP test – up 15 percent from 2005. Washington received high praise in the “Advanced Placement Report to the Nation 2007” for being among the nation's top five states that consistently increased AP passing scores, and for its rural schools initiative, which has expanded AP access in remote and rural schools.

Why do we use the WASL rather than a national test?

The WASL measures the skills and knowledge set out in Washington's academic standards. These standards were developed over several years by committees of Washington teachers and curriculum leaders, diverse parents, and business leaders from the key industries that drive our economy. More than 600 Washington teachers participate in WASL scoring each year.

Washington teachers specifically said they didn't want another multiple-choice test. They wanted a test that showed not only what an individual student *knew* but also what that student could *do* – that is, they wanted students to be able to apply concepts, solve problems and write clearly. They wanted a test that would show whether students could transfer the skills they learned in the classroom to the real world.

It takes longer and costs more to score a test that requires students to explain their reasoning and to write brief essays. But to test students *without* asking them to write and to demonstrate their skills would be like giving them drivers' licenses without asking them to pass the driving test.

What does the WASL tell us?

The WASL tells us whether an individual student is gaining the skills and knowledge set out in our state learning standards. Unlike other standardized tests, the WASL compares students to Washington's state academic standards – not to each other. The WASL also creates a rich source of data that school leaders use to analyze and improve instruction.

What doesn't the WASL tell us?

The WASL is not a diagnostic test – that is, its purpose isn't to pinpoint where an individual student is struggling and what kind of help is needed. Teachers use a variety of diagnostic, classroom-based assessments to tailor instruction to students' needs. To keep student learning on track, no test can substitute for parent conferences, report cards and other regular communication between families and schools throughout the year.

Is the WASL fair?

The WASL includes multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Different groups of students do better on different kinds of questions. Statistically, when white students are compared with students of color, white students get more of their points from multiple-choice items and students of color get more of their points from open-ended items. And, when male students are compared to female students, male students get more of their points from multiple-choice items and female students get more of their points from open-ended items.

Every WASL question also goes through extensive analysis by a Bias and Cultural Fairness Committee of specially trained educators, from a variety of backgrounds, before it counts toward students' scores on the WASL. Then each question is given a trial run with students to make sure the question does not pose special difficulty for students from different racial, ethnic, cultural or socio-economic backgrounds.

Are multiple measures in place for students to show they have the required skills?

Yes. A student's fate does not rest on one test score. High school students have five opportunities to take the WASL before their anticipated graduation date, and they have access to state-approved alternatives if the WASL isn't the best way for them to show what they know and can do. Students in special education also have options. State leaders put the test for graduation at 10th grade, knowing full well that not all students would pass it the first time, and that it would take some students until their senior year to master 10th-grade skills.

Can the WASL be improved?

Yes. And this is the right time to do so, because the state's testing contract is up for renewal next year. OSPI is collecting feedback from school leaders, state policy-makers and others about our current testing system. But we already know there are a number of issues that we must address to improve our testing system, including adding diagnostic assessments to guide instruction; getting a faster return of scores; making the testing program more transparent to teachers, parents and students; exploring end-of-course exams; developing online testing options; and providing additional ways to assess students in special education. The bidding process will ask contractors to address these issues, and will provide us an opportunity to explore the cost benefits and feasibility of various improvements.