

RE-RIGHTING THE WASL: PART ONE

By Todd Matthews

It is safe to say no other issue in the state's educational system has been more divisive than the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). Last year's Schools Superintendent race was decided over it.



“It's the idea that we would have some measure of standards.”

Then-incumbent Terry Bergeson supported the WASL; challenger Randy Dorn opposed it. Dorn won the election. In a press conference earlier this year, Dorn spoke in a passionate tone about how the WASL would be revamped.

“I had a campaign promise that I will replace the WASL and make it a better tool so that teachers, parents, and students can improve their student learning,” said Dorn. “Some people say that I may be moving too quickly. To be honest with you, we should have moved four or five years ago to what we are moving to today.”

That doesn't mean the WASL has been scrapped.

“The assessment itself can't change too much,” notes Washington Education Association (WEA) Director of Communications David Phelps. “It's been approved by the U.S. Dept. of Education for No Child Left Behind purposes. Dramatically changing the way students are assessed would require Washington to go through a new Federal improvement process. It would take a great deal of time, money, and personnel to go through this process again. OSPI [the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction] does not want to do that.”

Instead, Dorn is changing the WASL to the Measurements of Student Progress (MSP) in grades three through eight, and the High School Proficiency Exam (HSPE) at the high school level. Both will assess student's reading and writing skills (math and science will be revamped at a later date). High school students will be required to pass the HSPE in order to graduate. Further, Dorn will shorten the tests, shorten the written responses, return scores more quickly (two weeks or less), utilize computer testing and scoring, provide more diagnostic information showing strengths and weaknesses,

and minimize costs. According to the OSPI, MSP and HSPE will be introduced in spring 2010.

Will these new tests satisfy people who either supported or opposed the WASL?

“It's not the WASL we're wedded to,” explains Gary Kipp, who spent 20 years as a high school principal and is now Executive Director of the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP). “It's the idea that we would have some measure of standards.” Kipp says as long as revisions to the WASL still measure basic education standards established 15 years ago by the Legislature, he supports the plan.

Stephen F. Mullin, President of the Washington Roundtable, a non-profit, public policy organization representing Washington State's major employers, says, “We need to be assured that the changes proposed in no way reduce the rigor required. Whether it's called the WASL or an end of course assessment, I don't think we're hung up on the name so much as the purpose. I think we're talking about nuanced changes.”

But Juanita Doyon of Mothers Against WASL worries renaming the WASL doesn't address what she sees as a larger issue: exit exams don't work. “The business community wants the test,” she says. “As long as Randy Dorn supports the test as a graduation requirement, the business community will be happy.”

“Our hope right now is that the alternatives to the WASL or the exit exam would be improved and there would be local control,” she adds. “If a student has everything else in place, the local school district should be able to grant a waiver of the exit exam and award the diploma.”

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Before the tests are introduced next spring, Doyon and her group will be working hard on the issue; at press time, they were expected to meet with Dorn to voice their concern over the exit exam requirement. "We will be working to ensure that whatever test comes about, the parents will have the right to opt students out of it if they find it appropriate."


As to one argument that it's unfair for students not to graduate even though they complete all their coursework but fail the exit exam, Kipp sees it differently.

"I've talked to principals whose kids are doing fine on the WASL, but they are not graduating because they failed a class," explains Kipp. "You could say, 'Well, it's just that one class.' You could twist that argument around. It's like taking a play out of a baseball game and saying that play is the deal-breaker and forgetting all about the rest of the plays that went into the game. To isolate the WASL as something different than all the rest of the requirements is a poor argument."

For a closer look at the WASL's impact on students and the controversy surrounding it, please watch for Part II of "Re-Writing the WASL" in our September 09 issue of the Chamber E-Newsletter. ←



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