

DRAFT PAPER

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Draft Position Paper on Equity Issues in the State Assessment System

Background:

In 1993, the state legislature adopted the four goals of the Basic Education Act. The state was responding to concerns from a variety of stakeholders in initiating this broad educational reform effort. The four components of the system were:

1. Identify what students should be able to know and do.
2. Devise a system for assessment
3. Align resources to fulfill these, and;
4. Hold districts accountable for attaining the standards.

The Commission on Student Learning (CSL) adopted the Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRS), following extensive involvement of teachers, parents and community participants. The Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) has been developed to meet the need for an assessment. While the process needed for the State Board of Education to declare it valid and reliable has not been complete, it appears that at least several sections of it would already meet such scrutiny.

This effort is termed a “high standards, high stakes” reform effort, since not only are high standards set for what students are expected to know and do; but, students must pass the WASL in order to earn a Certificate of Mastery, a requirement for a high school diploma by 2008 (the ninth grade class of 2004).

The state is now well into the process of defining the accountability system. In 1997, the CSL accountability task force was developed and in 1998 this task force sent recommendations to the legislature, which adopted the fourth grade reading improvement goal. In 1999 the legislature added goals and established the Academic Accountability Commission, or A+ Commission (Substitute Senate Bill 5418). This group includes educators, business interests, parents, and community groups. They have established seven components to an accountability system for the state:

1. Improvement Goals and Plans
2. General Assistance
3. Annual Performance Analysis
4. Recognition Awards
5. Focused Assistance Based on a Performance Agreement

6. Performance Analysis

7. Intensive Intervention

However, this accountability system has only recently been enacted and has not yet had an opportunity to make improvements through assistance, recognition, or intervention.

Assumptions:

The assumptions of the current system appear to be:

1. Higher educational standards lead to higher achievement.
2. High standards can be measured by valid and reliable means.
3. Higher standards have a benefit for everyone. A corollary assumption was that participation in the high standards assessments was a key to participation in reform and the benefit to be attained from it.

Constitutional Issues:

The United States Supreme Court has interpreted a high school diploma to be either a “property right” or, more recently, an “entitlement”. Therefore, certain tests must be met if there is a risk an individual will be denied a diploma. The Fourteenth Amendment protections of Due Process apply. Procedural due process (prior notice), which is at least two years notice, and substantive due process, which is a somewhat trickier concept having to do, in this case, with whether the required skills were available. In educational and psychological terms, this amounts to curriculum validity and instructional validity issues. In other words, were the required skills, to pass the test, offered in the curriculum, and, were they adequately taught and for a sufficient length of time? Other requirements (“reasonable accommodations”; and IDEA) will not be dealt with in this paper, since they appear to have been adequately addressed by the alternate assessment and the existing testing accommodations offered by the state.

Aside from the obvious issues posed by substantive due process, there is a subtler problem posed in this area. It is: Have the skills to be proficient on the WASL, even if present in the curriculum and taught, offered for long enough or in appropriate intervention programs, for those who had significant initial difficulties with them?

There is a challenge posed by the state effort at reform and the legal obligation toward underperforming students. Can the educational reform effort encompass both high standards and equity?

System Accountability First:

The basis for considering equity in education rests upon both the vulnerability of children as well as their total dependence upon the system. This basic set of circumstances frames the most elemental moral demands on educators. It appears to have obvious implications for high stakes assessment assessments: System accountability must precede and be a necessary prerequisite for individual accountability. Let the accountability system make changes in curriculum and instruction for a sufficient length of time to insure a true opportunity to learn. This should include, but not be limited to, an effort to close the achievement gap between white students and students of color, for instance.

Methods of Participation:

There are, at this time, various means of participation in the state assessment system: The Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), with or without accommodations; and the Washington Alternate Assessment System. The latter is intended for approximately 1-2% of the population, determined by IEP teams, according to criteria.

We have, therefore, three ways to participate. Either directly in the state assessments without accommodations, or with accommodations, or in the alternate assessment.

The Problem:

The allowance of two years (from 10th grade to 12th) for retake of failed areas of the WASL, as well as, the possibility of School To Work programs, may help some of these students. But the very real possibility of denial of a diploma looms over large segment of the school population, at this time.

The Challenge:

The difficulty presented by any attempt to do something for these student is to avoid operating outside of the assumptions of the current system, which have a broad basis of support and are the product of years of effort by many stake holders. It would be very unwise to make any attempt to operate outside of this system. Some efforts could prematurely curtail the benefits of reform to these students, if their participation were ended and they were no longer a part of the effort to change classroom instruction within general

Possible actions:

There would appear to be several general possibilities for action. Some of these would be structural (altering either the timelines or the Certificate of Mastery. Some would be procedural (altering the testing system).

Changes In Assessment:

The state has not allowed test modification, since this is a threat to validity. For example, one modification might be reading the reading test to a student (the most obvious threat to validity) who has participated already and performed poorly, and whom professionals believe will need another means of demonstrating proficiency.

Another approach might be out-of level testing. This would work better with the Iowa tests than the WASL. The test manufacturers have procedures for out-of-level assessment.

Another option would be State Board approved local testing to demonstrate competence. Staff who has been certified by the state as competent scorers in a given area (e.g. Writing) could receive student work which demonstrated competence and could certify it demonstrates competence for students who wish to challenge a WASL score in an area they failed. This would preserve the standard, but add another source of data.

Finally, there could be some other method of assessment, which does not stem from the WASL or other state level assessments. However, this would appear to pose a potential challenge to the

assumptions of the current system. Participation in the state assessments is a key to participation in educational reform and, as such, should be supported. The advantage of the out-of-level testing and test modification approaches is they constitute participation, just of a different type. Therefore, they support, and do not detract, from the assumptions of the system.

Changes In Diploma or Certificate of Mastery:

Another approach would be either changes in graduation awards or a de-linking of the C.O.M. and the diploma. (In other words, not requiring the C.O.M. for a diploma, but requiring the testing and the reforms). Either of these would take State Board of Education and legislative action.

Modified Diploma:

Diplomas could be modified to show areas where competency standards were met, allowing some students to demonstrate achievement and earn a diploma.

Adjusted Criterion Score:

The current criterion (400) on the WASL could be adjusted for students who chronically under-perform over repeated administrations of state tests. This could be a combination of credits earned and achievement on other tests (e.g. ITBS/ ITED) or a statewide effort to gather data and issue a modified passing score for such students.

However, there is an assumption inherent in any attempt to do the above: That some effective instructional intervention has been attempted to remediate the deficit area(s). Therefore, it would be most effective if performance on state level assessments was combined with program intervention data, from research based instructional programs, and individual progress monitoring data.

Trend Data: Students of color and special education students

The WASL fourth grade trend data appears to suggest an upward trend in Reading and Writing over the past three years for all students of color. In Math, however, an upward trend appears to exist only for Asian and Native American students over the past three years; while the effect for Black and Hispanic students is too weak to suggest clear improvement. Fourth grade Listening scores are too inconsistent to establish any trend.

Seventh grade data suggests a consistent upward trend for all students of color in Writing. Reading and Math, however, appear to be weak. Listening at seventh grade is too inconsistent to establish a trend.

WASL tenth grade data over the past three years appears to indicate a strong upward trend for all students of color in Reading and Listening. Tenth grade Writing results appear too inconsistent across the three-year period for any trend. Tenth grade Mathematics results appear mixed, with strong improvements over three years by Asian and Native American students, but no clear trend of any strength for Black or Hispanic students.

At fourth grade, there has been a consistent trend of improving scores for special education students in Reading, Math, and Writing over the past three years of WASL administration.

There has been no clear trend at seventh grade and only Listening has posted any clear improvements across the three years at tenth grade.

Application To Alternate Assessment:

Rationale: The current state assessment system has provided trend data for three years regarding the performance of special education students on the WASL. There appears to be some improvement in scores in several areas on the fourth grade assessments, however, this appears uncertain in any areas at seventh and tenth grades.

Principles:

1. Measures should be criterion referenced, since the WASL is a criterion referenced assessment.
2. The desired measures should be substantially linked with the Essential Learnings, since this is the statement of what students should know and be expected to be able to do.
3. Basic sound psychometric properties should be possessed by the chosen instruments, in accordance with professionally accepted standards.
4. Participation in the state assessment system is the goal. In order to fully preserve this goal, the measures used for the commercially available option of the Alternate Assessment should be given in addition to the WASL. The rationale for this is that this group of students is capable of responding to the test, unlike students taking the portfolio option. These students are basically taking an alternative measure, since there is reason to question the validity of the WASL for them. It is an appropriate practice, in such cases, to request more, not less information. These students should have other measures, such as commercially available measures, if IEP teams decide that their WASL results, in each individual case, may not be a valid measure. Also, these students would have academic goals on their IEP's, unlike students taking the portfolio option, who typically would be more likely to have life skills or goals extrapolated downwards from academic goals.

Out-Of Level Assessment:

Ease of administration, staff level of training to give the assessment, and the skills covered or sampled by the assessment, are issues critical to accuracy and validity of any assessment system. Failure to sample appropriately the skills required of students can lead to either construct under representation, where the assessment system does not adequately sample the desired skills, or construct irrelevance, in which too many extraneous skills are assessed. The ITBS and ITED have the advantage of being assessments already given in Washington State schools, with which staff is familiar, and their relationship to the state assessment system is known.

The Washington Assessment Student Learning (WASL) is based on sampling the skills outlined in the Essential Academic Learning Requirements and any alternate system, such as the WAA, should strive to adhere to the same skill base. The WAA Portfolio assessment retains this same character by asking teachers to relate goals and objectives on which data is reported, to the Essential Academic Learning Requirements.

Riverside Publishing has performed an extensive study of the ITBS and ITED and the degree to which they sample the skills outlined by the Essential Academic Learning Requirements. This study demonstrates a close alignment of these assessments with the state Essential Academic Learning Requirements and Benchmarks. The degree of alignment is reported as very

substantial in all areas. While there are some specific areas where coverage is less, these are an exception. Riverside Publishing and the State of Washington have already approved these results as an acceptable degree of sampling of the state requirements in joint publications.

The publishers of the ITBS/ITED authorize out-of-level assessments and publish norms for it. Therefore, application of this process to the state alternate assessment system would not entail a procedure, which would violate either the bounds of norming of the test, or the approved scoring procedures of the publisher. There are specific procedures to follow for out-of-level scoring, which are described both in standard manuals and special publications distributed by Riverside Publishing.

The best practices, authorized by the publishers, suggest use of an alternate on the ITBS/ITED which is up to two years below the student's grade placement. This probably means that out-of-level assessment on the ITBS/ITED would be better as an accommodation at 5th grade and above, and as an alternate assessment at 4th grade and below. This rationale would reflect the more substantial portion of a student's knowledge from 4th grade and below, represented by an assessment two years below the grade placement (50% +); whereas, at upper grades two years would reflect much less (16% - 40%).

Sources

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<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OCR/testing/index.html>

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Please submit comments and suggestions to Jane Eberle at jeberle@prodigy.net

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