

## Education Reform

**Background** – In 1983, President Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education issued *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* which called for assessing the quality of teaching and learning to combat what it called “a rising tide of mediocrity.”

An egalitarian society values equal opportunity for all. Compulsory education stems from the belief that the public is best served when all students achieve at least a common level of learning. The pursuit of this ideal requires defining the body of knowledge that can reasonably be expected of all students, with appropriate exceptions for the disabled and a few others. Even as an ideal this is a standard far below what moderately bright students could achieve. The point of this kind of standard is not an ability-specific challenge, but a "pass-fail" evaluation reflecting the expectations of all citizens.

**Washington Education Reform** – In 1991, Governor Gardner created the Governor's Council on Education Reform and Funding (GCERF). The council, composed of legislative, school, and business leaders, developed recommendations designed to make improvements to Washington state’s public education system. GCERF’s final report was completed in December 1992, and many of its recommendations were incorporated into **House Bill 1209**, otherwise known as the **Washington State Education Reform Act**, in 1993. Together with the passage of SSB 5953 in 1992, ESHB 1209 put into motion the effort to focus education on student achievement rather than the time students spend in school. The legislature created the Commission on Student Learning, and charged the commission with developing statewide academic standards, an assessment system, and school accountability measures for public K-12 schools.

**Standards** – The Commission on Student Learning utilized several committees, composed of educators and community members from across the state, to decide what all students should know and be able to do. These agreed-upon common state standards are called Essential Academic Learning Requirements or **EALRs** (pronounced “eelers”). In subsequent years the standards in reading, writing, listening, math, social studies, science, arts and health/fitness were adopted by the Commission. In 1999, the Commission on Student Learning expired, and revising and promoting the EALRs is now the responsibility of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. To clarify for teachers, students and parents how the EALRs are reflected in grade-appropriate skills and knowledge, the OSPI creates Grade Level Expectations, or GLEs.

**Assessments** – A system focused on student achievement requires an objective, uniform assessment system based on the statewide standards. Since a fundamental goal of public education is to bring all citizens to at least a minimal level of proficiency, the state assessment measures student learning against the state’s academic standards. Students are tested each spring in grades 3-8 and 10 in reading and math. Students also are tested in writing in grades 4, 7 and 10 and in science in grades 5, 8 and 10.

**Graduation Requirements** - SSB 5953 of 1992 required that a “proficient” or better score on the 10<sup>th</sup> grade statewide assessment would be required to receive the Certificate of Academic Achievement, which in turn would be required to graduate from a public high school. The other requirements for graduation are earning of a minimum of 19 academic credits, creating a culminating project that integrates experience and knowledge, and forming a plan for succeeding in high school and the year after graduation. In 2000, the State Board of Education determined that the new requirements would begin with the class of 2008, the first class educated from kindergarten through grade 12 with the state’s higher learning standards in reading, writing and math. In 2007 the legislature passed 6023 to delay the

requirement to pass the math and science exam until 2013, so the classes of 2008-2013 are required to show competency in reading and writing as a condition of receiving a diploma (see Issue Paper “WASL”).

**Accountability** – With the performance-based system initiated with the reforms of 1992, state-level accountability focused on students learning rather than how much time students spend in school or what instructional courses they have received. The process of determining the learning goals and designing measurements has significantly shifted the focus of public education. The attention to student learning has enabled statewide measurement and the comparison of schools and groups of students. This new focus has elevated the importance of giving *all* students basic education. Those who might have been ignored in the old system have become the central focus.

With this new focus, policies which “work” (irrelevant prior to establishing and measuring learning goals) can be replicated or funded, and those practices which do not contribute to student learning can be reconsidered.

The ability to evaluate students’ grasp of the essential academic learning requirements enables identifying the quality of education which could be the basis of incentives for schools or educators. However, the WASL, because it is a once-per-year exam measuring general knowledge and skills on an essentially pass-fail basis, is not a strong tool for this purpose. The WASL provides a snapshot of what students have mastered to date, but it does not attempt to demonstrate how much a student has learned in a particular year or from a particular teacher. To measure growth, a student would need to be tested (1) at an appropriate level, (2) on the identified content to be learned, and (3) at the beginning and the end of the term.

In 2001, the federal government adopted the “No Child Left Behind Act,” which added accountability policies to address schools and districts which are not serving citizens well (see Issue Paper on the No Child Left Behind Act). The federal law presumes that basic levels of student learning are identified by the state and that gains are made each year to getting all students to succeed. The act anticipates a number of accountability measures to motivate schools to change to improve student learning. Those schools which do not make progress are expected to fund supplemental education services for students. Schools remaining below adequate progress for five years are expected to be restructured. Washington laws, however, do not authorize such actions. By the end of 2007, eight schools had not made adequate progress for six years.

**Funding** – the Governor’s “Washington Learns” study from 2005-06 and the “Basic Education Finance Task Force” study from 2007-08 both started with an assertion that education reform has unique costs which should be considered. A lawsuit initiated by various organizations in 2006 likewise makes this claim.

The existing funding mechanism of 180 days and the state’s salary allocation model for funding basic education do not address how funds are used or the instructional practices of local schools. Funding has increased for the assessment system, the Learning Assistance Program, staff development, school improvement and student remedial assistance. The current funding system allocates mostly on the basis of student time and teacher longevity and educational attainments rather than student achievement or teacher effectiveness. The Basic Education Finance Task Force, whose work concludes in December of 2008, could potentially consider reforms in the system of allocation.