

Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL)

What is the WASL?

The Washington Assessment of Student Learning, or WASL, is a statewide exam administered annually in public schools. The WASL began its life in 1993 with HB 1209, otherwise known as the Education Reform bill. The purpose of Education Reform was to replace time as the standard for advancement with skills. Among other stipulations in the 1993 law (see section on Education Reform) a timeline was established for the implementation of statewide assessment exams. The legislation also created the requirement that students pass the 10th grade assessment at the secondary level in order to graduate from high school.

The creation of the exam itself began with the establishment of the state academic standards, which are called Essential Academic Learning Requirements or EALRs (pronounced “eelers”). The EALRs were created by committees of teachers, parents, businesspeople and professors, and adopted by the Commission on Student Learning. Using the EALRs as a guide, the WASL was developed as the method to assess how well students met the standards. The test was first administered in 1997 in grade 4.

Frequently Asked Questions About the WASL

Who takes the WASL? In 2006 reading, writing and math WASL exams were administered to grades 4 through 8 and grade 10. A reading and writing WASL is administered to grade 3, and a science WASL is administered to grades 5, 8 and 10. Public school students are expected to take the WASL as they would be with any other exams, but parents are able to opt their children out.. When this happens, the student is recorded as a “0” score for the purposes of accountability. Home school students and private school students are not required to take the WASL, but many do arrange to participate.

What results have been achieved with the current expectations? For the 2006-07 school year WASL, OSPI reported the following percentages of students receiving “proficient” or better scores:

Grade Level	Reading	Math	Writing	Science
3rd Grade	70.9%	69.6%		
4th Grade	76.6%	58.1%	60.2%	
5th Grade	71.9%	59.5%		36.5%
6th Grade	68.0%	49.6%		
7th Grade	68.7%	54.6%	68.4%	
8th Grade	65.0%	49.8%		44.6%
10th Grade	80.8%	50.4%	83.9%	36.4%

How difficult is the WASL? Because the WASL reflects the general knowledge and skills one can reasonably expect from students, it is not designed as an advanced test, but as a measure of commonly agreed expectations. Compared to other exams reflecting national, other states’ or international expectations, the WASL generally expects less of students than similar measures.

Washington students have a more difficult time achieving a “proficient” score on the National Assessment of Educational Progress than on the WASL. Achieve Inc. studies exit exams, and reports that Washington’s test has modest expectations. The math portion of the tenth grade test, the most troublesome part of the entire WASL for students, is described as requiring students to answer questions covering “material students in most other countries study in 7th and 8th grade.”

What might explain the low success rate? A variety of causes explain disappointing WASL scores. Among them are low student motivation, curriculum and instruction which inadequately cover the EALRs, time spent on other instruction and activities that crowd out learning of the skills and knowledge identified in the EALRs, and classroom management difficulties.

Many suggest inadequate funding for schools accounts for low test results. Resources can provide (1) higher wages for existing educators, (2) more educators and facilities to reduce class sizes, (3) more educators to offer instructional time beyond the current 1,000 hours per year per student, (4) instructional materials beyond those already supplied by the existing funding methods, (5) additional training for educators beyond their existing “in-service days” and the continuing education they already are required to take. According to the December, 2007 report to the Joint Task Force on Basic Education Finance, funding enhancements may only have marginal effects on scores.

Who can see the WASL? Because the exam is costly to create and can be used longer if the questions remain unknown, OSPI takes great care to prevent the test questions from being released publicly. In 2005, parents pushed for the right to view their children’s tests, and are now able to view them under supervision. Beginning in 2006, a score appeal process is available for the 10th grade WASL.

Graduation Requirement

Beginning with the class of 2008, successful completion of WASL assessments in reading and writing will be required to graduate from a public high school in the state of Washington. Students will be allowed up to four opportunities for retakes, as well as alternative means to demonstrate proficiency. Those students who do not pass the Math WASL must continue coursework in math and retake the exam each year to graduate. Beginning with the class of 2013, students must also pass the math and science content area on the WASL to graduate. The math WASL will become two “end of course” exams in algebra and geometry or “integrated I and II” by 2014.

The legislature has detailed the alternative assessments for students who might have difficulty showing their skills on the WASL in state law RCW 28A.655.065. Students are able to use ACT/SAT scores, advanced placement examinations, acceptable grades on core subjects, or a “collection of evidence” for demonstrating tenth grade skills and knowledge.

No Child Left Behind and the WASL

In January 2002, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Among other provisions, the federal law requires that states establish academic standards and identify a way to assess those standards. The WASL test is the means Washington state uses to satisfy this requirement of No Child Left Behind. The WASL is used to measure student knowledge, as well as to evaluate school and district performance improvements.