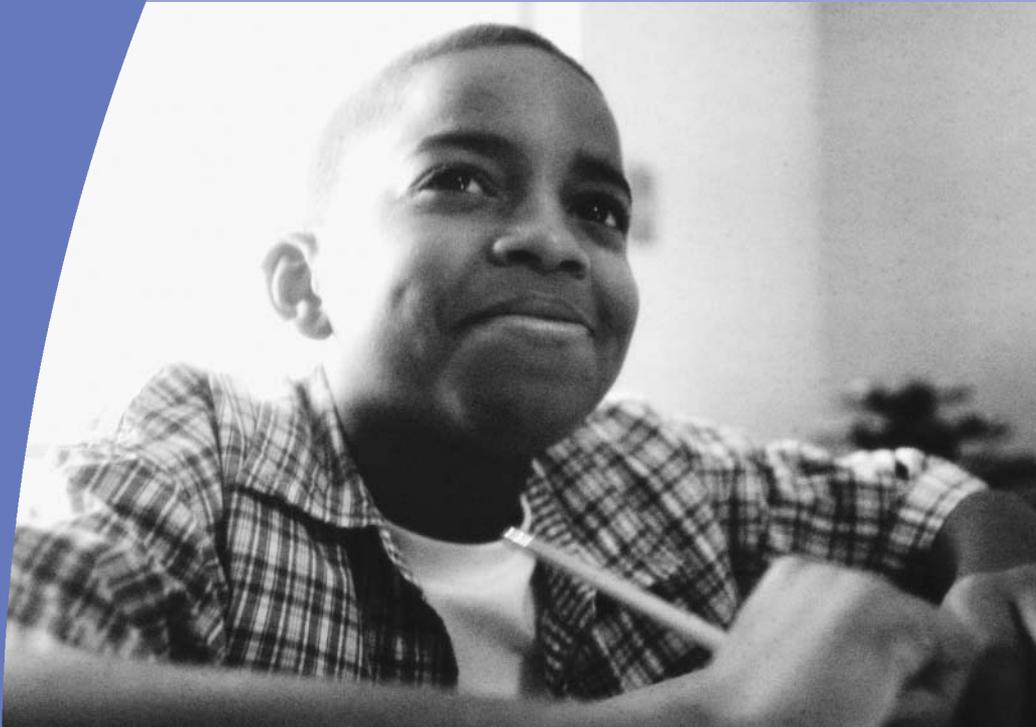




# Curriculum in Context

JOURNAL OF THE WASHINGTON STATE ASSOCIATION FOR SUPERVISION AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT



## A United Front

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**WORKING TOGETHER TO HELP  
ALL STUDENTS SUCCEED**

# The Two Washingtons

## OVER THE LAST TWO DECADES,

increasing emphasis has been placed on student assessment and accountability for achievement. With the recent requirements of ESEA/No Child Left Behind now being felt by school leaders and practitioners, it is time to look closely at what we are going to do differently to close the achievement

gap. While remarkable accomplishments have been made by school districts and individual teachers, we must now address how to effectively support and facilitate the success of our most vulnerable student populations. Focusing attention on formative, authentic classroom assessments offers great promise as a vehicle to both enhance instructional practice and facilitate students' ownership of their learning. Both teachers and students need to be fully engaged as we strive to meet the high goals that have been established.

### Historical Perspective

A brief review of the roots of assessment reform is appropriate, for we are actually involved in two separate reform movements. One of the reform efforts is driven by assessment, and the second by curriculum. With the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the assessment and accountability reform movement gained national attention and led to dramatic changes in testing programs, as well as the increased involvement of policy-makers and parents critical of the status quo in public schools. Educational reform began with widespread concern about low test scores and a view that America was falling behind other nations. An urgency to respond to what was seen

BY JOHN BOND



as a national crisis led to school reform legislation at the federal level and in every state in the union. The high-stakes testing programs that are now commonplace in public schools grew out of this beginning. It is often not realized, however, that this externally driven reform movement coincided with another reform effort, with which it was soon allied.

The second reform effort focused on the school curriculum and its instructional delivery in the classroom. It has been led by subject-area experts, classroom teachers, discipline-based organizations, professional organizations and research centers. While the emphasis of curriculum reformers is not upon high-stakes testing and accountability, their push to improve instructional practices is highly compatible with the goals of the assessment reformers. Performance assessment, for example, is rooted in curriculum and has become a common thrust for both the accountability and curriculum reform camps.

### Seamless Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Rather than being acknowledged as integral to teaching and learning, assessment is often viewed as a separate process. However, to bridge the looming achievement gap that we now face, assessment must be incorporated into the daily business of the classroom. Seamlessness between teaching, learning and assessment should be our target. The inclusion of formative, authentic assessment practices as routine components of learning activities offers students the opportunity to reflect upon what they are learning. It is through this

reflection that students experience assessment as a part of learning, rather than as a separate activity.

When students are involved with the assessment of their learning on a daily basis, they become empowered to take ownership for their learning. Assessment expert Richard Stiggins has suggested that educators think of students as assessment users, in order to avoid casting them in a passive role. Informal, ongoing assessments of students' achievement naturally occur in most classrooms, but are often used solely by teachers to monitor their progress and to guide lesson planning. While these are appropriate and effective uses for classroom assessments, it is the inclusion of the student as a consumer of this information that offers the greatest potential for improving student learning.

Assessment reform is not only about compliance with state and federal mandates, but also is driven by the vision and energy of curriculum practitioners and researchers. The formative classroom assessments that have long been advocated by curriculum reformers need to be embraced, for they offer the potential of both improving classroom instruction and facilitating student ownership of their learning. Informal classroom assessments will be essential tools as educators face the hard work of meeting ESEA's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and Washington state's Certificate of Mastery requirements over the next few years. School districts, schools and individual teachers need to bring ongoing informal assessment into the forefront of classroom practice. It is an innovation whose time has come.



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*John Bond is executive director of elementary education in Northshore School District.*

# Curriculum in Context

## A United Front

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ALL STUDENTS SUCCEED

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*The editorial committee seeks articles that provide perspectives, research and useful information about the problems of and ways to improve the teaching and learning process in Washington state.*



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### Acronym key

In this issue, we're providing a key to often-used acronyms to avoid duplication.

**AP:** Advanced Placement

**EALRs:** Essential Academic Learning Requirements

**NCLB:** No Child Left Behind

**OSPI:** Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction

**WASL:** Washington Assessment of Student Learning

**WSLFA:** Washington State Learning First Alliance

# A Message From the Editors

**OVER THE LAST DECADE**, every educator has surely heard the phrase, "It takes a village to raise a child." This simple phrase creates a metaphor that stirs within us a hope for heartfelt, collective action on behalf of our children. This phrase, like so many others we hear repeated in the daily mantra of political and educational jargon, is too vague to hold any of us accountable for actions we must take to create meaningful change in our public educational system.

To bring the metaphor to a level that engages us as individuals on behalf of all the children in our state, we have to carefully plan and visualize the kind of village we want to be. We must consider what it will take to build this kind of village, and we have to consider the ways in which we will enlist the support of our village members so each has an integral role in building and sustaining our desired community.

This issue of *Curriculum in Context* was developed around these considerations. In his article, Brian Barker shares the history of a concerned group of educators, parents, and business leaders in Washington state that came together to envision the type of public education they believed would be necessary to help our children flourish. Their work together created the Washington State Learning First Alliance (WSLFA).

The Class of 2008 will be the first class to graduate under new statewide graduation requirements. Two articles feature information about these requirements, along with information about the efforts of concerned groups to help ensure all students are equipped to meet them. Patty Martin shares the State Board of Education's graduation requirements and their alignment with the Washington State Learning Goals, and Melissa Heaton shares about the Partnership for Learning's support of these changes through the Class of 2008 campaign, "Opening Doors, Opening Minds."

BY GREG FRITZBERG AND DEBORAH GONZALEZ



The question of how we prepare each child to meet challenging state or federal standards raises many differences of opinion: Bellevue superintendent Mike Riley discusses the rationale and resulting success of encouraging greater numbers of high school students to enroll in Advanced Placement classes in his district; Bill Weeks

presents a diagnostic assessment program that helps educators gather evidence about specific areas needing instructional improvement so that schools can respond proactively; and Rob Lindfors considers issues surrounding social promotion and its impact on student learning.

Each of these features, though in different ways, considers what we mean when we say that all children need to meet rigorous standards. In our desire for both quality and equality, we must ensure that we have supportive systems in place that allow every child to be actively and successfully engaged in deep learning.

As thoughtful members of "the village," we must each consider what it will take to raise our children well. Understanding their needs through better assessments, understanding policy decisions and how they impact our children's futures, and understanding how our educational system inhibits or promotes children's learning are foundational aspects of this task. We are proud to bring together the voices of some of our villagers and to continue developing that shared understanding.

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*Greg Fritzberg and Deborah Gonzalez are co-editors of Curriculum in Context.*

# A Teacher's Voice

BY DIANE FRANCHINI



**THAT FAMILIAR FEELING** has crept into my waking hours; it's no stranger to any teacher as the calendar inches along through the autumn. Anticipation coupled with a hint of fear settles in as another school year takes shape. Many school districts across the state, including Enumclaw School District, have jumped into educational restructuring that has rocked the foundation for many veteran teachers. Some colleagues turned to retirement, while others have looked into other career choices in an attempt to resist this change.

Three years ago, when Enumclaw was awarded one of the Gates Foundation Grants, I knew that I faced a critical decision in how to approach the remaining years of my teaching career. With 27 years under my belt, I knew I could probably continue to teach the classes I had been teaching and quietly retire before the brunt of the change hit, but that's never been my style. I decided instead that I wanted to know everything I could about this "reinvention of education," so that I could make a more informed decision. The result of that decision has been renewed energy in my teaching. I find myself proclaiming to my colleagues and to our community the many benefits of our restructured high school (we've split our high school of 1600 students into 7 small schools), not because I'm easily swayed but because I've done the research and visited schools that are living proof of the success that's possible.

Last year, with a staff of five teachers, one administrator, two classified staff members and 110 students, one of two "partner schools" opened. I am one of those teachers and proud of the first-year accomplishments of our small school named ECHOES. We faced challenges unlike any that I had experienced in my teaching career, but each hurdle just added new energy and life to our school. Newfound autonomy over our teaching schedules and daily structure became both a blessing and a curse. If

something didn't work (and many things didn't go as we had envisioned), we were pressed to do something about it — immediately. That meant that if change was to happen, we were the ones who were going to make it happen. We could change the structure of our day overnight, rather than send it to a committee to study the effects of

the change before making a decision. The essential question for us was always, "Is this going to be better for our students?" At no time during my career have I been more aware that I am in this business to teach young people—not to teach a particular textbook, curriculum or subject. Yes, I'm an English teacher, but more importantly I am a teacher of young people.

As I look back at the "survival skills" I've used to cope with such change, I can point to two foundational beliefs that have not been swayed. The first holds me responsible for creating change, rather than allowing change to happen without my knowledge. If I take an active role during the change process, I can not only understand why a change is happening to me, my classroom or our school, but I can help to direct the change, as well. This allows my voice to be heard during the process, rather than after a decision has been made. The second coping skill is built on confidence. As a teacher I have always (even my first year) believed that I have something to offer young people. I have developed a confidence in myself, my subject area and my profession that allows me to face new situations with a peace of mind.

I once again find myself meeting the school year with excitement, as well as a touch of fear. This year is bringing new opportunities and new challenges that test my foundational beliefs, but I know that I can survive whatever the future may hold.

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*Diane Franchini teaches at the new ECHOES School in the Enumclaw School District.*

# A Team Effort

## The Emergence of the Washington State Learning First Alliance

BY BRIAN BARKER

The subject of education can evoke powerful emotions in people, especially among those whose life's work involves helping students. So it is not surprising how challenging it is to get educators to agree on questions such as, "How do we help all students achieve high standards

in our schools?" There is no quick fix or easy answer.

Fortunately, groups like the National Learning First Alliance have tackled this question head-on, working through its state alliances to pursue a student-focused learning agenda. These national leaders realized that working together and speaking with a unified voice could lead to significant improvements in public schooling.

I was delighted when Washington state was invited to create a state chapter of the Alliance, but I did have a few reservations going into it. I first became involved in the Learning First Alliance at the

national level. National Association of Secondary School Principals Executive Director Gerry Tirozzi called and asked me to represent NASSP in the work the National Learning First Alliance was doing to create state alliances. My first response was to ask if this would just be another group to meet somewhere, discuss something and depart feeling fine, having postured itself to advance some narrow interest or another. The calendars of educators are too often filled with meetings and conferences that lack focus and take us away from the important tasks of working with students, teachers, principals and parents. To

his credit, Tirozzi assured me the group would find a meaningful way to bring together leading national educational organizations dedicated to pursuing a common agenda to improve American public education.

My thoughts next turned to the agenda. The Learning First Alliance focuses member organizations on the essential issues of improving student achievement and facilitates collective and aligned efforts toward educational improvement. These are the Alliance's core goals:

- Ensure that high academic standards are held for all students.
- Guarantee a safe and supportive place of learning for all students.
- Engage parents and other community members in helping students achieve high expectations.

In further conversations about the Alliance, including those with Patti Mitchell, who directs the state initiatives for the Learning First Alliance, I grew convinced the effort had merit. I imagined what we

could do in Washington state if each of our education associations and key leaders focused their attention, pooled their expertise and crafted comprehensive and effective approaches to meeting the challenges of improving student learning. This eventually left me wondering, "If this diverse group could agree to align their efforts around core goals, why can't we do this in Washington state?"

My musings were ultimately more than theoretical. The National Learning First Alliance was selecting five states to use as pilots.

Given Washington's excellent work in recent education reform, Washington was selected with the hope that we could forge action-oriented, state-level collaboratives around the "Learning First" collaborative concept and the previously identified goals. In correspondence with Executive Director of Learning First Alliance Judy Wurtzel, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Terry Bergeson confirmed Washington state's participation in this exciting new initiative.

As the primary education agency in our state, OSPI was selected to

organize key education groups around an initiative that was not driven by political or legislative agendas. Dr. Bergeson believed that the research presented in *Every Child Reading* was valuable and did much to persuade legislators and to avert a disastrous war over reading. With further investigation, she brought together key association leaders in our state to discuss the Learning First Alliance. Consensus was developed around the following themes:

1. We were interested in working together to institutionalize educa-



tion reform and to improve student achievement.

2. We all agreed that we could do a better job by getting to know each other and working together in a more collaborative fashion.

3. We acknowledged the need for a stronger voice for public education in our state.

Not unlike all of the organizations we work in, successful state partnerships base their work on good relationships among all stakeholders and the organizations that represent them. It is understood that in the public education enterprise, good working relationships among stakeholders – parents, educators, politicians and others – are essential to student learning. Education organizations and leaders can address systemic problems and remove rather than perpetuate barriers to improved student learning. Collaboration requires more than conversations, no matter how constructive. It must lead to action and must permeate all our organizations' activities and become an integral element of our daily work.

After their preliminary meetings about potential collaboration, 15 leading education organizations created the Washington State Learning First Alliance (WSLFA). This group continued to meet and to move from potential themes to an actual mission statement and accompanying goals. Together, the Alliance will:

- Recognize the interdependence of all Alliance organizations.
- Focus on state learning goals and EALRs, share responsibility for all student learning, advocate for supportive learning communities that are culturally inclusive and expand

the capacity of educational systems.

- Promote safe and supportive places of learning for all students, staff and families.
- Mutually affect the development of a fair and meaningful accountability system.

Early planning suggested the need to bring together key leaders (much beyond the WSLFA core group) from each of the associations for a "Learning First Summit." As a result, over 200 people from all facets of public education, including 25 student leaders, met in the Seattle area in the Fall of 2002. The two-day meeting was developed around the theme "Relationships for Results." It focused participants on building a shared understanding of the challenges faced by the participating organizations and establishing priorities about education reform efforts. As a result, the Alliance began to identify a set of common issues, such as closing the achievement gap through the use of successful models, best practices and data-based decision-making. It will also work toward improving the state's assessment system, with an emphasis on developing incentives and resolving issues related to the Certificate of Mastery. Finally, the state Alliance remains committed to ensuring funding for public education. This must be specifically related to the better use of existing resources, sustaining current funding, and identifying activities and programs that need new resources.

Summit participants also worked to develop common messages around the issues and challenges facing public education in Washington state. Based on

participant discussions and input, the key messages centered on three areas:

1. The state's education community has recommitted to the goals of education reform as a cohesive group. This is the time for the education community to celebrate its successes, reflect on concerns and make changes where necessary.

2. Citizens must see the value in the education profession. WSLFA must help the education community elevate citizens' understanding of the importance and impact of its work.

3. Quality public education rests upon coordinated leadership; quality teachers and staff; appropriate funding; and an engaged, informed community.

These preliminary messages, targeted to external audiences, will continue to be refined and formalized through discussions among Alliance organizations and their respective members.

Faced with a particularly difficult legislative session in 2003, state Alliance members centered on the progress made in education over the past 10 years. With common achievement standards, high accountability and good systems for assessing academic performance, we are seeing more effective learning, improving test scores and greater public support in school levies and statewide education initiatives. How do we sustain these efforts in light of the budget shortfall? The entire education community gave the loud and clear message, "Don't cut our funding!" Did it do any good? In the end, some cuts were made. But the cuts might have been greater without this common voice. Most analysts suggest that education was cut much less than any other agency,



yet that is not cause for pride, given the monumental issues of class size, teacher quality and additional learning opportunities for all children. We are already talking about next year's budget.

In addition to the Leadership Summit and legislative agenda, the Alliance worked collaboratively to assist the state in creating our statewide plan to meet the requirements for the new Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Each subcommittee formed to address the various components of the plan had representation from members of the organizations represented in the Washington State Learning First Alliance (again, beyond the core group). Some of the subcommittees were responsible for creating plans to address topics such as Standards and Curriculum, Student Assessment Systems, Adequate

Yearly Progress, Highly Qualified Staff/Certification, Professional Development/Technical Assistance, Early Childhood and Parent/Community Involvement. The plans were shared across the state to receive input and to help answer frequently asked questions. Washington's plan has since been approved by the U.S. Department of Education.

Perhaps the most encouraging result of this newfound effort has been its capacity to bring together groups that have not always been able to see a common focus in their efforts to improve education for students in our state. The opportunities we now see are great. We recognize that we are simply creating a foothold at this time, but this foothold will help secure us as we begin to create what will be a stronger future. We are certain the

work will be worth our efforts, and we have a strong sense of commitment from our members. As Richard Bach says, "You are never given a dream without the power to make it come true."

The Washington State Learning First Alliance is indebted to all of its members for their perseverance, with special thanks to the leadership committee:

- Mary Alice Heuschel (OSPI)
- Larry Davis (State Board of Education)
- Deborah Gonzalez (Puget Sound Educational Service District)
- Lisa Bond (Washington State PTA)
- Jill Jacoby (Washington Association of School Administrators).

Larry Davis and Jill Jacoby have recently been named WSLFA's new co-chairs and will do an excellent job leading the next phase of this effort in the months ahead. Let's go for it!



**Brian Barker**  
is executive  
director of the  
Principals'  
Association in  
Olympia.

# Effective 2008

## The New High School Graduation Requirements in Washington State

BY PATTY MARTIN

The goal of Washington state's 1993 Basic Education Act "shall be to provide students with the opportunity to become responsible citizens; to contribute to their own economic well-being and to that of their families and communities; and to enjoy productive and satisfying lives."

In an effort to comply more fully with the spirit of this goal, the Washington State Board of Education revised the high school graduation requirements in October 2000.

The Board of Education considers rigorous and meaningful graduation requirements to be an important accountability factor in our efforts to prepare young people to live satisfying and productive lives. The current graduation requirements are appropriately linked to Washington state's four central learning goals:

- GOAL 1: Read with comprehension, write with skill, and communicate effectively and responsibly in a variety of ways

and settings (reading, writing, communication).

- GOAL 2: Know and apply the core concepts and principles of mathematics; social, physical and life sciences; civics and history; geography; arts; and health and fitness (math, science, social studies, arts, health and fitness).
- GOAL 3: Think analytically, logically and creatively; and integrate experience and knowledge to form reasoned judgments and solve problems (critical thinking).
- GOAL 4: Understand the importance of work and how

performance, effort and decisions directly affect future career and educational opportunities (work awareness and planning).

The revised high school graduation requirements will be implemented beginning with the ninth-grade class of 2004 (graduating class of 2008). Here are highlights of the revised requirements:

- The minimum number of state credits for high school graduation remains at 19.
- One of the required credits shall be in the **arts**, which may be satisfied in the visual or performing arts.
- The two-credit graduation requirement in physical education is changed to two credits in **health and fitness**.
- The one-credit **occupational education** graduation requirement mandates a series of learning experiences designed to help students acquire and demonstrate competency under broad goals three and four (*above*), which are required for

success in current and emerging occupations.

- School districts retain their authority to establish graduation requirements beyond those set by the State Board of Education. Hence, the current graduation requirements are appropriately understood as minimum requirements.

Before moving to graduation requirements that are not credit-related, it is important to clarify what a credit now means for credited courses. Traditionally, a high school credit is awarded for 150 hours of planned instructional activities approved by the school district. School districts now have the discretion to award high school credit based on clearly identified competencies that are locally determined through district policy, which do not need to be tied to a specific number of hours of instruction.

In addition to the more traditional course credit requirements, three significant non-credited requirements have been established at the state level, with details to be worked out at the district level:

- **Culminating Project.** Each student shall complete a culminating project for graduation. This project consists of students demonstrating their knowledge and skill competencies related to broad goals three and four. Again, individual districts will have latitude in their implementation of this graduation requirement.
- **High School and Beyond Education Plan.** Students shall create an education plan for their high school experience, including what they

expect to do the year following graduation.

- **The Certificate of Mastery** graduation requirement (set by the legislature) takes effect beginning with the graduating class of 2008, subject to empirical confirmation by the State Board of Education by Summer 2004 that the Grade 10 WASL test is sufficiently valid and reliable for graduation purposes. *(See summary graphic of the new graduation requirements.)*

#### Public Knowledge About New Graduation Requirements

The State Board of Education's interviews with parents and students show that more communication is essential to provide the necessary information regarding the new graduation requirements. For example, Mrs. Green, a parent of two children, said she was not aware of what her children will need to accomplish in order to graduate from high school: "I think all parents need a district overall education plan. The plan should be a blueprint of district requirements for children in elementary, middle and high school. Parents should be informed from the beginning of their child's public school career."

In another example, Jonathan White, a high school sophomore, knew the total number of credits required for graduation, and he was aware of the core subject areas, but he felt unsure of the non-credit requirements. "I know I have to complete a project for graduation, but am not sure exactly what I need to do," White said. Moreover, he said he was not sure if his parents were aware of the new graduation requirements.

Like White, high school senior Laura Ayres knew the number of

credits required for graduation and what subjects she needed to focus on during her senior year but was also unsure about the project requirement. "I know I have to complete a portfolio and presentation for graduation," said Ayres. "I think the school needs to explain things in more detail. I received an explanation of the portfolio and presentation at the end of my junior year. I believe we need more time." Unlike White, however, Ayres said that her parents were up-to-date on what students needed to do to graduate.

More frequent information sessions outlining the new graduation requirements might be necessary. Ms. Esmond is a parent of two children. One child is currently enrolled in the public school system as a high school sophomore. "The school provided a high school orientation at the beginning of my son's freshman year. We were given a lot of information that was more complex than what I remember about the past high school graduation requirements. I believe this information should be provided at the beginning of every high school year, in the middle of the year and at the end of the year," said Ms. Esmond.

Fortunately, Washington state leaders are aware of the communication needs that face them. They plan to inform all educational associations, communities, school districts and schools about the new high school graduation requirements on a continuing basis: "The Washington State Board of Education revised the state minimum high school graduation requirements to align with a performance-based system, which will be the focus of a major outreach communications campaign this fall by the Partnership for Learning,"



said State Board President Bobbie May. The Partnership for Learning campaign is focused on helping inform parents and students of the Class of 2008 about each of the new mandates, including the Culminating Project, High School and Beyond Education Plan and Certificate of Mastery. Communications activities with parents, business and community leaders, district administrators, principals, teachers, school counselors, journalists and local communities will

- explain the purpose, intent and details of the state's graduation requirements;
- communicate how common graduation standards promote equity by ensuring that all students receive a meaningful education; and
- provide information from Washington and other states about effective practices in helping all students achieve standards.

The leadership and support of the Washington State Learning

First Alliance (WSLFA), comprised of 15 leading education organizations, is critical to the success of the revised graduation requirements. WSLFA is endorsing the Partnership For Learning's "Class of 2008 Campaign," a key part of which is communicating the importance of providing clear and accessible information about graduation requirements to the parents, and all citizens, of our state. All families and students deserve to have the information they need to successfully earn a more rigorous and valuable diploma and the future opportunities such a diploma will provide them.



***Patty Martin** is the manager for legislation and communications at the State Board of Education.*

**The New Graduation Requirements and their Alignment with Washington State's Central Academic Goals**

Credits	Subject	Aligned with Student Learning Goal Number
3.0	English Reading, writing and communication	1
2.0	Math	2
2.0	Science Physical, life and earth sciences 1 of the 2 credits must be in lab science	2
2.5	Social Studies Civics, history and geography	2
2.0	Health and Fitness	2
1.0	Occupational Education General work skills	4
1.0	Arts	2
5.5	Electives	

**19.0 Credited Minimum High School Graduation Requirements**

Non-Credit Requirements:

- Culminating Project 3 & 4
- High School and Beyond Education Plan 4
- Certificate of Mastery 1, 2 & 3

# The Countdown Begins

The Partnership for Learning's "Class of 2008 Campaign"

BY MELISSA HEATON

High school graduation day should signify the culmination of years of hard work by students, parents and educators. Graduation is a time to celebrate achievement and look forward to new opportunities and endeavors. But what if, after four years of high school, students still lack the

fundamental skills they need to access these opportunities? Unfortunately, that is the reality many graduates face today.

New statewide graduation requirements such as the Certificate of Mastery and Culminating Project are designed to address this skill gap by requiring a common level of knowledge and skills that every student needs in order to be prepared for living and working in the 21st century. All students, not just those on the traditional college-bound track, must be proficient in core subjects like reading, writing, mathematics and science. The goal is to ensure that every student has the

necessary foundation to succeed in life after high school.

To build this solid foundation of skills and knowledge, Washington state has made systemic changes to public education by creating clear academic standards for every student, a statewide assessment to measure if students are meeting those standards and, beginning with the class of 2008, a new set of graduation requirements.

### **Making the Diploma More Meaningful**

Beginning with the class of 2008, all Washington high school students must meet new state graduation requirements. They must do this:

*pass 19 credits in high school classes*

- 3 English
- 2 Mathematics
- 2 Science (including one lab)
- 2.5 Social Studies
- 2 Health/Fitness
- 1 Visual or Performing Arts
- 1 Occupational Education
- 5.5 Electives.

*earn a Certificate of Mastery.*

Students must meet standard on the 10th-grade Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) in reading, writing, math and eventually science.

*complete a Culminating Project.*

This integrated learning project asks students to think analytically, logically and creatively, use their experience and knowledge to solve problems and understand how their work ethic will affect future career and educational opportunities.

*craft a High School and Beyond Plan.* Students must complete a

plan for getting to graduation and tell what they plan to do after high school.

### **Class of 2008 Campaign**

The Class of 2008 Campaign, supported by a grant to Partnership for Learning from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is a comprehensive outreach effort to nearly 80,000 families with students in the first class required to meet the new state graduation requirements. The goal of the campaign is to inform and engage parents now, so they can work with their child's teacher and school to ensure that he or she is prepared to meet these higher expectations for graduation. Many of the state's education associations and government entities — including several organizations represented by the Learning First Alliance — have combined resources and expertise to launch this effort. A Class of 2008 Communications Committee was formed with representatives from many of these education organizations to help administer the roll out of this campaign. Each of these organizations is working to engage constituents in this outreach effort.

### *Supporting Organizations*

- Academic Achievement and Accountability Commission
- Association of Educational Service Districts
- Association of Washington School Principals
- Multiethnic Think Tank
- Office of the Governor
- Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction
- Partnership for Learning
- Public School Employees of Washington

- Washington Association of School Administrators
- Washington Association of Student Councils
- Washington School Counselors Organization
- Washington School Public Relations Association
- Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
- Washington State Board of Education
- Washington State Parent Teacher Association
- Washington State School Directors' Association

To help communicate about the new requirements, the campaign kicked off with a mailing to families with students in the class of 2008. The mailing included a copy of the publication *Opening Minds, Opening Doors*, which is a primer on standards, the WASL and the new graduation requirements. This signature publication from Partnership for Learning provides an overview of the changes in public K-12 education in parent-friendly language. The mailing also includes a cover letter from State Superintendent Terry Bergeson and Governor Gary Locke explaining why these new graduation requirements are important. In addition, a concerted effort is being made to reach families whose primary language is not English. The mailing has been translated into the state's top four spoken languages: Spanish, Russian, Korean and Vietnamese. The Partnership is also working with community-based organizations around the state to more broadly distribute this information to non-English speaking families.

School districts have responded overwhelmingly to this opportunity. Currently, over 160 districts — including the state's largest school districts — are participating in the fall mailing. This represents 80 percent of the class of 2008. The free materials were mailed to families in the second week of September after the 2003 WASL scores were released. As part of the mailing, parents were encouraged to sign up for an email list-serve that would provide ongoing information about Washington's school improvement effort, as well as helpful tips for supporting their child's learning.

Following the large-scale mailing in September, the Partnership sponsored parent events in eight communities around the state to further discuss the new state graduation requirements. Local school leaders described additional district level requirements. As with the publication, the emphasis was on providing families with information and tools they can use to make sure their children have the skills and knowledge they need to graduate and be prepared for their post-high school plans. Ready-to-use presentation materials are available to other districts and schools around the state that want to host similar events in their community.

Parents can also learn more about Washington's school improvement effort and how they can help prepare their child for the new graduation requirements in parent-led workshops. Using the highly successful *Parent to Parent: Success for Every Child* model created by the Washington State Parent Teacher Association and Partnership for Learning last spring, 62 parents were trained to

deliver a 90-minute interactive workshop. More than 120 presentations were conducted around the state, reaching more than 1,500 Washington parents in 96 communities. A new cadre of parents will be trained this fall to do presentations on the new graduation requirements. Trained parents are encouraged to have an expert from their school or district attend the meetings and answer more technical questions they may not be equipped to answer.

To support this campaign, the Partnership's Web site will be significantly enhanced to provide more in-depth information for parents, educators, students and others about the Certificate of Mastery and other graduation requirements. In addition, there will be resources for students and families to begin thinking about their post-high school plans, including links to Washington's four-year public universities, community and technical colleges and other career planning tools. This information can be accessed at [www.partnership4learning.org/classof2008](http://www.partnership4learning.org/classof2008).

While the campaign and initial mailing were targeted toward parents only, educators, administrators and other instructional leaders are obviously key players. The materials in the mailing encouraged parents to talk to their child's school staff to find out more about their district graduation requirements and other local efforts to ensure that students are prepared to meet these new expectations. To help inform and prepare superintendents, principals, community relations staff, curriculum and instruction directors, middle school teachers and guidance counselors for the increased interest from parents, the

Partnership will mail them the same packet two weeks before the parents receive the information.

#### Life After High School

Whatever path students choose to follow — going straight to work or moving on to a four-year university, community college or the military — they need to be prepared for an increasingly complex and competitive information-based society. According to a study by the National Alliance of Business, only 15 percent of the jobs available in the United States are low-skilled. This number has changed drastically from the 80 percent of low-skilled jobs that were available 50 years ago. More and more, graduates need to have stronger skills to be ready for their life after high school.

However, in a 2002 survey of 50,000 Washington businesses, employers reported that applicants were commonly lacking critical skills such as problem-solving, communications and basic math and writing. In Public Agenda's 2003 report, *Where We Are Now*, employers and college professors echoed Washington businesses' concern over high school graduates' preparedness for life after high school, with only 41 percent of employers saying that public school graduates will have the skills to succeed in the work world and 47 percent of professors saying that public school graduates will have the skills to succeed in college.

In addition, community colleges and four-year universities are experiencing increased enrollment in remedial courses in English and mathematics, where students need to repeat classes and learn skills that should have been acquired in high school. This repetition is costly

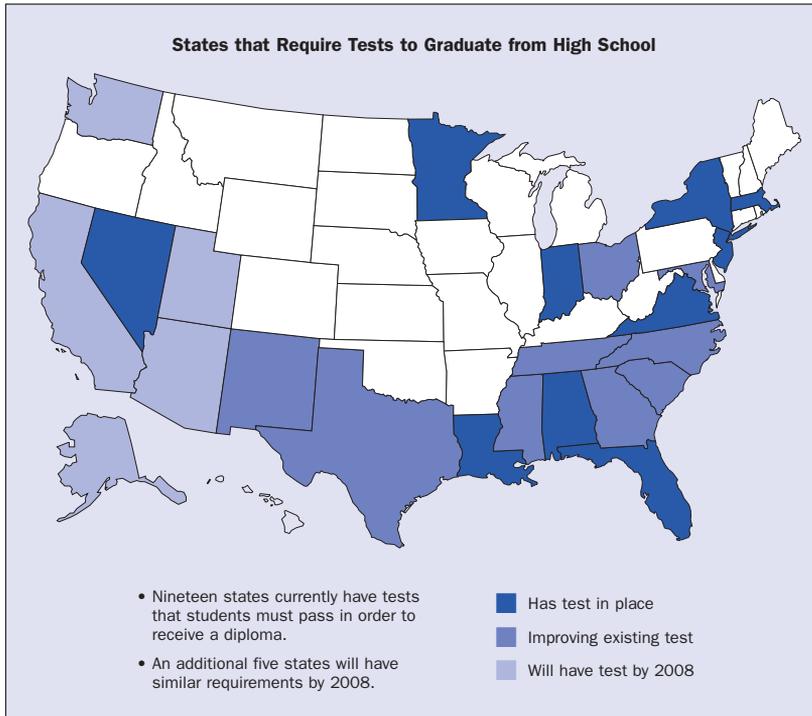
to students, schools and parents. In Washington, a full one-third of students require remedial courses when they enter post-secondary education. This indicates that students who are on a college-bound track in high school are not necessarily ready for college. Higher graduation requirements will help ensure that every student in the state — not just the college-bound — is prepared to succeed with post-high-school plans.

#### Lessons Learned: Two Other States' Classes of 2008

Like Washington, Massachusetts and Indiana created learning standards and assessments as part of a statewide effort to improve student achievement. While these states had a faster timeline for implementation, they still required students to pass their statewide assessments in order to graduate. In total, 19 states have tests that students must pass to graduate, and five others will have this requirement by the year 2008. In Washington, the class of 2008 represents the first group of students that took the fourth-grade WASL in 1997. This longer and more deliberate implementation timeline allows students to receive a full course of study based on the higher learning standards *before* requiring them to demonstrate proficiency at the 10th-grade level.

#### Massachusetts

In Massachusetts, students in the class of 2003 were the first ones required to pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) in order to graduate from high school. The MCAS tests students' abilities in English and mathematics. When students first took the test, only 67 percent of the



ule. This was equal to Indiana’s historic graduation rate before this requirement was in place. Today, more and more Indiana students are taking rigorous academic classes, and the graduation rate has continued to increase.

The success of these states can be attributed to persistence and continued focus on the ultimate goal of helping all students achieve at higher levels. Washington’s school improvement efforts and new graduation requirements have an underlying moral premise: to prepare all students for their lives beyond high school. The reality is that all children deserve a quality education that will open doors for them after high school. As educators, administrators, instructional leaders and parents, it is imperative that we work together to communicate clearly to students what we now expect of them, and what they will need to do in order to succeed after high school.

class met standards and completed the graduation requirement. Massachusetts gave students the opportunity to retake portions of the test they did not pass. After these retake opportunities, 92 percent of the class of 2003 graduated. This passage rate was a result of a collective effort to provide high-quality instruction aligned to the state standards, and support for students who struggled to meet proficiency standards. Also notable are the strides Massachusetts has made in closing the achievement gap between white students and ethnic minority students. MCAS scores show that students with limited English proficiency and Native American students have made large gains in achieving the higher stan-

dards in public schools in Massachusetts. These common graduation requirements and standards for all students have promoted equity and drawn necessary attention and resources to students who were previously achieving at much lower levels.

*Indiana*

In Indiana, students in the class of 2000 were expected to pass their 10th-grade assessment in order to graduate. In 1998, when this class was in the 10th grade, only 54 percent passed the math and verbal tests. Two years later, after the class did remedial work and was provided retake opportunities, 89 percent of the class met standards on the test and graduated on sched-



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# Detracking AP

One District's Quest to Increase Enrollment in Advanced Placement Courses

BY MIKE RILEY

In June 2003, *Newsweek* ranked three Bellevue high schools among the top 20 in the country, based on numbers of students taking Advanced Placement (AP) tests. While we were gratified to receive the recognition, we were disappointed with a number of responses that seemed to have

missed the point as to why a district would push the AP program.

The Advanced Placement program does more than test kids. It tests adults, those responsible for deciding which kids are right for AP. In addition to policy-makers, this group includes those who teach kids in all the grades leading to AP; those who create curriculum, develop schedules and determine prerequisites; and those who monitor student progress and provide institutional support. The Advanced Placement program pushes all of us. It pushes our educational philosophy, our beliefs about human potential and what we mean when

we say we have high expectations for all kids.

Participating in tough high school courses is generally accepted as the best way to prepare for the challenges of college, and having an AP course on a transcript is likely to increase the chances for admission to a student's college of choice. Since most school systems are quick to agree that AP classes are right for the college-bound, we might broaden the discussion about who's right for AP by asking, *Who's right for college?*

Seventy percent of the nation's high school graduates attempt college, and that figure will continue to grow as long as students receive

advice like this: "In today's global, technology-centered economy, individuals need to be well educated and possess higher-level thinking skills to compete professionally. The college degree has replaced the high school diploma as the pass to economic freedom" (Center for an Urban Future, 2000). The debate about whether schools should provide students with training for work or preparation for college is now obsolete. In the information age, nothing is more valuable to a job seeker than a college degree. Brainpower is the manpower of the new millennium. Utility and knowledge have become one and the same (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

With higher education now the common aspiration of American young people, some educators have found it necessary to create distinctions within this burgeoning population and have taken the corresponding position that only some students are right for AP classes. This insistence on creating a "better class" of college-bound students results in far too many students entering college without the back-

ground they need to be successful. Indeed, only half of those who start earn a degree.

The research of Clifford Adelman (1996) should weigh heavily on those who prevent students from taking AP courses. Adelman found that students who took just one AP course nearly doubled their chances of earning a college degree. Who is most likely to reap long-term benefits from AP classes? The students who benefit most are those most likely to struggle in college, the very ones often relegated to second-class status in their high schools. Fortunately, the anachronistic, uninformed notion that only some students are capable or worthy of taking AP classes is falling out of favor rapidly, as evidence builds each year that an ever-widening swath of our students do quite well in these challenging courses.

### **A Comprehensive Approach to School Reform**

I believe all but a very few students are right for AP, because I believe all students deserve a college preparatory curriculum. The exceptions to the rule are those with serious disabilities, a group equivalent to roughly two percent of the K-12 population in our school district. We have not yet achieved this goal in Bellevue, but we are getting close. In the class of 2003, 77 percent of our students completed one or more AP or International Baccalaureate (IB) classes, 30 percent took four or more, and 18 percent completed at least one across all the core subjects: English, social studies, math and science. Making the AP curriculum the “common” curriculum for our high schools requires a great deal more than allowing — or pushing — students into AP classes. For stu-

dents to succeed at this level, we need to take a comprehensive approach to school reform.

### **A Rigorous and Coherent Curriculum**

A school system without a rigorous and coherent curriculum will deliver an education marked by both inefficient repetitions and significant gaps in knowledge and skills; that has always been the case in America. There should be little surprise that many students reach the upper grades unprepared for the demands of college preparatory work. In our district, we have aligned our curriculum in every discipline to AP goals and standards. As our math curriculum developer likes to say, “We are establishing two math tracks in Bellevue: one leads to AP Calculus, the other to AP Statistics.” In the class that just graduated, 71 percent completed pre-calculus and/or an AP or IB math class. The class that begins sixth grade this September will all be enrolled in what was previously considered an honors track.

### **Support for Students When They Need It**

We cannot afford to discover that students are not qualified for college when their SAT scores arrive. Early intervention is essential. Our teachers begin assessing their students in the first weeks of kindergarten, using what they learn from these assessments to guide their instruction. A combination of classroom assessments and state and national tests administered throughout the students’ 13 years helps us make decisions about who needs support and when. We do our best to deliver assistance both in the classroom and through a variety of special programs. Extended

learning time, for example, includes summer programs available as early as kindergarten, as well as daily after-school tutorials across all of the secondary grades.

### **Teacher Development and Leadership**

Without expert teachers, no curriculum — no matter how coordinated and powerful — will reach its full potential. In the Bellevue School District, we are taking a number of steps to ensure that our teachers are competent to help all students maximize their potential. We provide a four-day AP Institute that includes a special session for elementary-level teachers; we send teachers in our IB schools to national training programs; we sponsor a variety of workshops and curriculum development opportunities; we offer teachers an additional eight days of compensation to pay for their professional development work; we employ James Stigler’s (1999) “lesson study” model to encourage collaboration within and across grades; and we have an early-release every Wednesday to give teachers time during the workday to work with each other and improve their skills. In the vast majority of cases, our own teachers, several of whom are now Exam Readers and presenters for the College Board, lead these staff development efforts.

### **Creating Meaning out of Statistics**

In an attempt to maintain AP standards while dramatically increasing enrollments, we insist that all AP students take an AP Exam when they are enrolled in an AP course. We offer two choices: the exam administered by the College Board for that year, or a previously administered AP Exam given under

the same testing conditions and graded on the same standards. The vast majority of students — over 90 percent of students who take AP classes — take the College Board-administered exam. The results of our students' AP Exams are meant first and foremost to inform our work: our curriculum development, our staff development and our provisions for student support. While test results are important to us, high scores are not the primary goal. It's a standard practice in Bellevue to praise participation rates over test results, even to expect test results to drop below the national average when enrollments go well beyond the national mean. If high scores were the goal, they could be guaranteed by restricting access, which is not a game we choose to play. Does this approach work? We administered over 3,000 AP and IB exams this past spring with a total population in grades 9 through 12 of fewer than 5,000 students, placing us among the top one percent of school districts in the country in terms of percentages of students taking these tests. Even with such a strong participation rate, our percentage of exam grades at 3 or above was identical to the nation's.

#### Our Next Steps

When we started our drive to make all students AP students, enrollment increased quickly and significantly. We learned, however, that many of those who failed to take advantage of open access had something in common: they were second-language learners, they were special education students, their families were struggling financially, or a combination of these factors. As a recent article by Susan Yonezawa, Amy Stuart Wells and Irene Serna



called "Choosing Tracks: Freedom of Choice in Detracking Schools" explains, simply opening the door to higher-level programs is not enough to attract students traditionally excluded from these programs. We are now much more aggressive in recruiting these students, and we are even considering requiring advanced courses for graduation in an effort to finally break the hold these unwanted traditions have on all of us. Will we push these kids out? During the time our overall AP program has been growing, our dropout rate has been cut in half, from 18 to 9 percent, and we hope the same will be true of our non-mainstream populations if we provide them with sufficient support to meet our heightened expectations.

The AP program was launched in the middle of the last century to enable some of America's elite, its finest students, to study at a level that would keep them intellectually engaged and prepare them for the challenges of the country's top uni-

versities. One of the most exciting challenges of this century is to realize that "fine" students — at least in terms of potential — sit at every desk in our schoolhouses and that all of them deserve to experience the Advanced Placement program.

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# From Accountability to Diagnosis

Introducing the *Measures of Academic Progress Assessment*

BY BILL WEEKS

Numbers fascinate Americans, especially educators. Teachers spend hours developing, administering and recording assessment data. We document everything, looking for proof that our children are mastering the learning goals covered in the curriculum. District and building-level leaders

want evidence that students are learning, while parents want to know if their child is on track for college. Finally, state and federal governments demand documentation that helps them monitor the effectiveness of public spending on schools.

The assessment trend in our schools goes back to French psychologist Alfred Binet in 1904, when he and a group of colleagues developed a tool to measure which primary grade students might be “at risk,” at the request of the Minister of Public Instruction in Paris. It was not long before the standardized testing movement spread to American shores. To help today’s schools

measure the success of students, we use a variety of assessment tools designed to compare some schools and groups of students with other schools and groups of students. Every spring, millions of students spend hours taking tests that measure how well they can read, write and compute.

While most of these tests provide a perspective on how our students compare academically with students of similar ages and grade levels across America, the data provides little help to educators wanting to know the learning needs of individual students in the classroom.

Fortunately, however, not every

standardized test prioritizes group comparisons over diagnostic assistance. The Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) in Portland, Oregon, has created an assessment tool designed to measure individual student learning over time, as opposed to comparing individuals and groups at one point in time. The *Measures of Academic Progress*, or MAP test, measures a student’s skill level in reading, mathematics and language usage, and the Washington version of the MAP test is aligned with the EALRs.

Student scores on the MAP test are reported as RIT scores (Rasch Units), after Dutch mathematician George Rasch. The Rasch scale is an equal interval scale, meaning that the amount of learning required to move from one RIT score to the next is equal anywhere along the scale, and the scale is not dependent upon age or grade level. For example, a fourth-grade student with a reading RIT score of 209 has mastered the same reading skills as a tenth-grade student with a reading RIT score of 209. Thirty-seven school districts

use either the MAP test or the paper/pencil version, the Assessment Levels Test (ALT).

### Measuring Continuous Learning

A major advantage of the MAP test, compared with other standardized tests, is the ability to measure students' learning across their academic careers based on an established Learning Continuum for each subject. The RIT score represents the instructional level of the student on the Learning Continuum. For example, a student with a RIT score between 211 and 220 in the area of mathematical computation would be working on the mastery of these skills when using whole numbers:

- Divide a three-digit or four-digit number by a one-digit number.
- Use multiplication as a check for division.
- Multiply by multiples of 10 and 100 with an emphasis on mental math.
- Divide a four-digit number by a two-digit number (NWEA, 2003, p. 4).

As the student masters these skills, the teacher will move the child on to more difficult skills in the area of mathematical computation (still whole numbers). The new skills in this area would focus on learning to:

- Solve for missing addends in an addition or subtraction sentence.
- Develop computational fluency with division facts.
- Divide multi-digit numbers using a calculator.
- Introduce the math strategy of compatible numbers in estimating for all four operations (NWEA, 2003, p. 5).

Our focus, using the MAP test and the Learning Continuum, shifts from using curriculum materials

tied to grade levels to the use of materials based upon the skill levels of individual students. The emphasis shifts from curriculum coverage to skills mastery, particularly skills tied directly to the EALRs.

### Maximizing MAP Test Benefits

The MAP test and the Learning Continuum, developed by the NWEA, provide myriad benefits to educators, students and parents. The following description shows a process for utilizing MAP information in a way that maximizes student learning. Please note that these instruments do not provide the total picture of the learning abilities of students. Teachers should use at least three assessment sources — drawn from other standardized tests or teacher-produced assessments — to make educational decisions related to teaching and learning. The MAP test appears to correlate very positively with the WASL, Accelerated Reader and other standardized instruments. The primary benefit of the MAP test is its focus on individual growth as opposed to comparisons, and thus it provides unique and helpful information to the savvy educator.

#### 1. Analyzing Data

Once the teacher collects the data on his or her students, he or she must begin to look for patterns and trends, signs of success and areas of concern. The Class Roster tool, provided by NWEA, provides teachers with specific information about each child's overall level of reading, mathematics and language usage. Each subject contains performance scores for each of the goal areas appearing on the WASL. This allows the teacher to further analyze each student's abilities in detail. For exam-

ple, a fourth-grade student may read aloud better than other students in the class but may perform below expectation in the area of literal comprehension. Using the MAP test and Learning Continuum, the teacher would know which skills the student needs to focus on to improve in this area of reading.

#### 2. Selecting Instructional Goals

Once the teacher develops a clear understanding of the strengths and learning needs of his or her class, he or she creates a plan of action. In addition to developing classroom-wide goals, teachers should think about individual children, helping each student to set learning goals that help them strengthen weak skill areas. In addition to individual student and classroom goals, each grade level and entire buildings may need to set specific goals to improve weaknesses in the curriculum, in accordance with information provided at that level.

#### 3. Organizing the Classroom

With a clear idea of the learning needs of students and the establishment of specific educational goals, teachers must organize their classrooms for effective instruction. When can large group activities work effectively, and when must students work in small, flexible instructional groups? What materials work effectively for the specific skills each child needs? All of these questions influence how teachers set up their physical spaces and stock their classrooms in terms of resources.

#### 4. Selecting Instructional Strategies

Once the teacher develops a clear understanding of her students' learning needs, sets the instructional goals and develops a class-



room organizational plan, he or she must select instructional strategies that will facilitate effective learning.

##### *5. The Cycle Continues*

Formal assessment usually occurs at the end of a unit of study or at the end of a chapter in a textbook. However, good teachers know that assessment plays a valuable role in the planning process. After we work our way through any particular unit of teaching, we need more information. If the students have mastered what we taught, what do we do next? If the students have struggled, then what happens? Ongoing assessment provides the information teachers need to make important instructional decisions, which themselves will require continued assessment.

##### **Other Practical Applications**

In addition to using the MAP test and Learning Continuum to measure student learning over time, sev-

eral other applications become available to educators. MAP data provides useful information to assist with the development of our annual School Improvement Plans.

Educators can identify specific strengths and weaknesses of students, classes and grade levels. By monitoring student learning, trends become more visible in data, allowing for curricular and instructional adjustments designed to help students overcome specific learning difficulties. For example, if students in grades two, three and four all demonstrate less than typical growth in number sense, teachers can analyze available data and make educational decisions to help students master these skills more effectively in the future.

Educators can also use assessment data to cooperate better with one another, sharing materials within a building or making decisions to revise or adopt an entirely new curriculum. As teachers look together at the diversity of the students they serve, resolving differen-

tiation issues becomes more possible. Also, the Learning Continuum concept helps parents understand the progress their children are making in school. Teachers can easily identify for parents and students the skills previously mastered, the skills currently being learned and the skills the child will work on in the future.

The Measures of Academic Progress and the Learning Continuum provide effective tools for assessing the skill level of individual students, and provide a scope and sequence for teaching new skills while strengthening those areas needing additional attention. Teachers who incorporate the effective use of assessment data with a sequential planning process will see their students make significant learning gains throughout the school year. What better use of assessment data might there be than that?

Note: For additional information on the Measures of Academic Progress assessment tool and the Learning Continuum, contact the Northwest Evaluation Association at [www.nwea.org](http://www.nwea.org).



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# Chutes and Ladders

Social Promotion, Grade Retention and the Underlying Causes of Both

BY ROB LINDFORS

In debates over the issue of grade retention, those allowing what educators call “a system of social promotion” and those arguing that we must hold back more students tend to talk past one another. Essentially, the only positives that can be ascertained in the debate deal with the

question of what will be done for children *in addition* to their promotion or retention.

There is some talk of alternatives to both promotion and retention, such as the early identification of at-risk children with the goal of remedying a student’s academic difficulties *before* a promotion or retention decision is made. However, this is not an alternative but an ideal. It is an extremely important ideal, but it is beside the point when decision-time comes.

Certainly, no one believes that early intervention will yield the desired result 100 percent of the time (or even come close to that).

We can be fairly certain that teachers and schools are already working hard, trying to bring up every child to passing levels of achievement. A decision still remains to be made: when children have made insufficient progress for legitimate promotion into the next grade, should they be socially promoted or should they be retained in their current grades until their achievement levels are deemed sufficient?

The trouble is, there are valid criticisms and reservations that can be leveled at either viewpoint. This truly is a case of which “lesser of two evils” is the course to take. But in formulating their arguments, the

language each side uses frequently implies that either social promotion or grade retention is the problem, obscuring the fact that both are rather symptoms of other educational and societal issues, flip sides of the same coin. The middle ground is what is actually being done to address these other issues. Since both social promotion and retention have been shown to be flawed, neither providing a satisfactory solution, there must be a middle ground of genuine understanding that can lead to solutions to the underlying problems.

In responding to the question of “which is better,” I put the following question to advocates of social promotion: *Do you truly believe that for each and every failing child, in each and every situation, the child should be promoted rather than retained?* And I put this question to advocates of retention: *Do you truly believe that for each and every failing child, in each and every situation, the child should be retained rather than promoted?* Perhaps I’m naïve, but I believe that advocates

of either side can honestly only answer each question, “No.” Given that, the answer to the question of “which is better” is this: It depends on the child and the situation.

### The Studies

The opposing sides in the debate typically cite studies that they feel demonstrate that retention is a completely failed policy, or conversely, that it can have positive effects. Opponents of retention frequently overstate the weight of evidence against retention by ignoring studies that have shown that it can have positive effects, or by minimizing any and all positive aspects of retention in studies where the final conclusion is that the effects are mostly negative. Opponents of social promotion sometimes ignore what appears to be a preponderance of evidence indicating the harmful effects of retention. In other words, there can be benefits from retention, but there are also great hazards.

What seems to be overlooked is that there really are no proper studies on how effective or harmful social promotion is. Social promotion is studied only as a sidebar to retention. The problem is that an accurate study of the effects of social promotion is probably not possible. “It is impossible to tell how common social promotion is. Currently, virtually no statistics are kept on social promotions, in part because few districts explicitly embrace or admit to the practice” (Thompson, 2000). And the negative effects of social promotion, such as sending children the wrong message “that effort and achievement do not count” and “that teachers wield no credible authority to demand hard work” (AFT, 1997), as well as the danger that teachers will dumb

down their teaching because the policy “hampers [their] ability to teach grade-appropriate material” (Roderick, Jacob and Bryk, 2000), are not likely to be accurately measurable effects.

Likewise, a truly accurate study of retention may not be possible. The difficulty of conducting and interpreting reliable studies on retention is not acknowledged enough. Most studies over the course of the last century appear to weigh solidly in favor of social promotion over retention. However, there are varying opinions.

*Is the evidence really that clear and unequivocal? Summary judgments aside, the research studies on which these conclusions are based reflect a familiar pattern of conflicting and contradictory results. Most of the studies ... actually show insignificant differences between retained and non-retained children; some studies favor retention by a small margin, others do not, and significant differences point in both directions. More studies find in favor of promotion, but there are many exceptions (Alexander, Entwistle and Dauber, 1994).*

*Research on grade retention, focusing on the effects on children’s academic performance and on social and personal adjustment, has been inconclusive. Moreover, methodological problems inherent in the bulk of grade retention studies may invalidate even those findings (Steiner, 1986).*

Jackson (1975), in one of the earliest comprehensive reviews of retention studies, concludes that “the accumulated research evidence is so poor that valid inferences cannot be drawn.”

The primary difficulties in conducting and analyzing studies on retention lie in deciding where to draw comparisons. There are flaws in every design. Alexander, Entwistle and Dauber (1994) delineate the difficulties in great detail in their study of retention in the Baltimore School System. In short: “Appropriate comparisons are difficult to accomplish, and studies inevitably fall short of the optimum.”

*Choosing the right group with which to make comparisons is a tricky business. If retained students are compared with students the same age in the next grade, the promoted students may look better just by virtue of having been exposed to more of the curriculum. On the other hand, grade repeaters get more favorable treatment in a study that compares them with their grade-mates (Viadero, 2000).*

As a practical matter, there is no way to begin except to compare retained and promoted groups that are not equivalent ... a comparison group of “at risk but promoted” children will never be matched perfectly to a group of retained youngsters (Alexander, Entwistle and Dauber).

Ideally, the method to use in these studies is to start with a large sample of at-risk students from which students are randomly assigned to be either retained or promoted. The large sample and the random assignment helps ensure that the groups are statistically well-matched. However, this approach is not used because it is assumed that parents will be unwilling to have their children’s fate decided randomly and that educators and administrators will be unwilling to participate in such a



study. It has been described as an unethical approach. Unfortunately, it is the only method from which truly reliable results can be derived (Steiner; Alexander, Entwistle and Dauber). One of the most outspoken critics of retention, Robert Hauser (who frequently cites retention studies as evidence of the failure of retention), writes:

*One of the frustrations of retention research is that — excepting three early studies — there are no true field experiments. Many educational researchers dismiss this option because, they believe, it would be unethical. But if we truly do not know whether retention helps or hurts low-performing students, why would it be unethical to assign volunteers either to retention or promotion? ... In my opinion, if there is truly continuing disagreement about the observational evidence on retention and academic achievement, then a large-scale field experiment is a logical choice (1999).*

Lorrie A. Shepard, who has been quite critical of studies showing positive effects of retention, concedes that studies showing negative effects are also not perfect. “They’re each flawed, and people have to sift through what the sources of error are in each in order to make sensible interpretations” (quoted in Viadero).

#### **Middle Ground**

Both sides of the promotion/retention dispute actually share middle ground in regard to strategies that get at the underlying problems associated with promotion and retention. Educators should begin by focusing the debate on the issues and strategies that can genuinely make a difference, first in the areas of general agreement, and then work toward concord in the more disputed areas. (Neither the elimination of social promotion or retention will make any difference in resolving these underlying issues;

that particular debate is mostly just a distraction.)

It is beyond the scope of this article to spell out what the underlying education and societal problems are, or what the possible strategies for solving them are, but in general terms they involve ensuring that every child in this country is provided with an equal opportunity to learn. In other words, the relevant arguments are about our investments in the educational system as a whole *before* the inevitable decisions that must be made in reaction to large numbers of students not progressing academically in the way they should.

#### **Conclusion**

Surveys indicate that public opinion is solidly behind the idea of ending social promotion. A 1997 Wirthlin Worldwide poll indicated that 93 percent of the public favored requiring students to meet basic standards before passing them on to the next grade. A November 1998 Public Agenda poll indicated 81 percent of parents thought retention would be better than passing struggling students to the next grade and expecting them to keep up. In the 1999 Gallup/PDK poll, respondents said they favored stricter standards for social promotion, even if it significantly raised retention rates.

There is not much difference between ethnic minority and majority parents on this issue. In an August 1994 Public Agenda poll, 80 percent of white parents and 77 percent of black parents said that public schools should pass students to the next grade only if they show they have gained the requisite knowledge and skills, rejecting the

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COMING UP

## By Executive Order

ENGAGING THE *NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT*  
IN WASHINGTON STATE



Curriculum in Context

JOURNAL OF THE WASHINGTON STATE ASSOCIATION FOR SUPERVISION AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

SPRING / SUMMER 2004

## Lindfors title

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option of promoting them if they had at least made an effort by attending classes regularly and working hard (Teixeira, 2000).

Rejecting retention outright is tantamount to complete rejection of any common ground with public sentiment. Perhaps parents might feel differently when faced directly with the prospect of having their children retained, but in the majority of cases, most parents agree to have their children retained even when they are given the final say.

What is the proper resolution of this dilemma, the middle ground that might unite us? Here is a conversation starter to discuss with your friends. I look forward to continued discussion in our state about how we handle “failing” students. Each time a child is considered insufficiently ready for the next grade, the parents should always have the ultimate say as to whether to retain or promote. Only in the following year should the school be able to require that the child be retained. This allows the parents to give due consideration to the issue and make what they feel is the correct decision, but with the understanding that in the following year the appropriate amount of progress must be made. What do you think? I will keep listening for more discussion about this critical issue in our schools.

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**Rob Lindfors** is an affiliate faculty member in private instruction at Bellevue Community College and has taught music in the Bellevue School District.

# President's Page

## HAS ANYONE ELSE NOTICED

that the older we get, the faster time seems to fly? It seems like just yesterday that we were closing out the 2002-03 school year, and now we are already a few months into an outstanding school year.

With each school year, we find optimism blended with various challenges. This year, and for the next couple of years, economists tell us, our largest challenges may be in the fiscal arena. Washington has been among the states hardest hit by the downturn in our national economy. And while signs of progress are emerging, the upturn is more likely to be gradual than immediate. Also on our minds in the education arena are some of the realities posed by implementing the federal No Child Left Behind legislation and our own accountability system. While fourth-, seventh- and tenth-grade students showed gains in almost all areas measured by the 2003 WASL, many challenges still remain.

It is during daunting times like these that I am grateful for organizations like WSASCD. Why? Because within our ranks are some of the most creative and dedicated people I know, people with the vision and wherewithal to see us through times like these. Similarly, I am grateful for the pulling together of all within the education community. Our association is pleased to be a partner of the Washington State Learning First Alliance, a coalition of 15 statewide education organizations that have united around a common focus: to improve student learning in our state. I am proud of WSASCD's leadership in the state and its role is cultivating the positive attitudes that have sustained us through the current times, and that will continue to inspire us in the years ahead. Our membership is among the most diverse of any education organization in the state, and from our diversity comes strength, perspective and credibility.

Perhaps WSASCD is best known for its role in providing premier professional development opportunities to its growing

BY HELENE PAROFF



membership. This year's lineup is no exception. On October 10, Educational Service District 101 — in conjunction with WSASCD — sponsored an all-day conference on differentiated instruction. Karen Austin, an ASCD national presenter, spoke on "Principles of Differentiated Instruction: Responding to the Needs of All

Learners." Breakout sessions, focusing on different subject areas, were also offered to an enthusiastic group of teachers.

The annual conference committee, headed up by Dr. Pam Veltri, has been hard at work putting together this year's conference, "Learning and Leadership: Steppin' It Up a Notch." Action labs include Understanding by Design by Jay McTighe, Transforming Leadership for Learners by Edna O'Conner and the Denver Reading Program by Lori Conrad, among others. Friday's keynote speaker is Dr. Harry Wong, and the Saturday Institute is being presented by Drs. Rick and Becky DuFour. As you can see, this year's conference promises to be among our best. I look forward to seeing you all March 4-6 in Spokane. You can check WSASCD's website for more detailed information.

WSASCD's commitment to school reform, coupled with its belief in partnerships, sets an outstanding example for all of us as we pursue our state and national education goals. By attitude and action, our organization can take pride in the fact that we are walking the walk that will, in fact, leave no child behind. Thank you for your commitment to kids and to WSASCD, and best of luck in the school year ahead!

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*Helene Paroff is assistant superintendent of ESD 101 and president of WSASCD.*



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**ARE YOU OR YOUR COLLEAGUES** serving K-12 students in creative ways? Can you shed light on legislative trends that might benefit educators across the state? Can you illustrate recent educational research claims through stories from schools and classrooms on the front lines? If so, consider taking some time to clearly and persuasively contribute to the intellectual life of the WSASCD community. Please e-mail a 50-100 word preview of your contribution to [gregf@spu.edu](mailto:gregf@spu.edu) and we will promptly send a Submission Guidelines form for your 1000-2500 word article. If you have any questions, please e-mail Co-editor Greg Fritzberg at the above address or call (206) 281-2363.

**Submission Deadline**

Spring/Summer 2004 — February 1, 2004  
Fall/Winter 2004-05 — August 1, 2004