



NEWS RELEASE

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Washington State Educators Prefer to Improve State High School Test Rather Than Eliminate It, Study Finds

Teachers credit WASL with helping to boost students' reasoning and writing skills but want more relevant test data and other changes

WASHINGTON—July 29, 2009—High school teachers and administrators in Washington State have revised curriculum and instruction significantly to respond to federal and state testing and accountability policies, according to a new in-depth report by the Center on Education Policy (CEP). In particular, teachers have made a strong effort to ensure they cover the types of writing and reasoning skills emphasized by the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), which serves as both a state high school exit exam and Washington's accountability test for the No Child Left Behind law.

The CEP report, *Lessons from the Classroom Level: Federal and State Accountability in Washington State*, was based on detailed observations of 15 classrooms in English language arts, math, and science, as well as on interviews and focus groups with 145 teachers, administrators, parents, and students in six Washington State high schools in six different districts. (The schools and districts participated anonymously in the study.)

The administrators and teachers participating in the study cited several positive effects of the WASL, including better alignment between high school curriculum and the state's academic standards, instruction that encouraged students to write coherently and explain how they reached their answers, and improved writing and reasoning skills among students.

While many teachers referred to the WASL in their instruction and made an effort to teach skills they expected to be tested, the standards and test did not appear to have a constricting effect. In the classrooms observed for the study, teachers often initiated open-ended discussion or Socratic-type dialogues and used technology creatively to motivate students.

Several districts and schools also offered additional courses, interventions, or parallel academic programs for students who have failed the WASL or are at risk of failing.

Study participants said they would rather see the state make changes to the WASL than eliminate it, as Washington State superintendent Randy Dorn has considered doing.

“Teachers and administrators told us that the uncertainty surrounding the future of the WASL has created confusion and stress,” said Jack Jennings, President and CEO of CEP. “Most wanted to keep the WASL and make it better instead of scrapping it.”

Study participants suggested several changes to the WASL, including shifting to an assessment that includes pre- and post-testing to capture individual students’ growth over a school year; breaking down test data in ways that are more relevant to teachers; and providing more professional development on using data to guide instruction.

Study participants also proposed changes to the No Child Left Behind Act and related state accountability requirements. These changes included using alternative measures of achievement for accountability, and revising accountability and test requirements to better consider the needs of English language learners and other students.

Washington State is one of three states participating in a larger study by CEP on the classroom impact of federal and state accountability. Last year, CEP issued reports on Rhode Island and Illinois.

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Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in January 1995, by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national, independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent any special interests. Instead the Center helps citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.

More information on CEP and its research is available online at www.cep-dc.org .
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