

## **Editorials concerning the WASL; September 2005 through December 2005; Spokesman Review; Spokane, Washington**

The following are editorials published by the Spokesman Review, Spokane Washington, between September 1, 2005 and December 31, 2005. Overwhelmingly, these letters point out the glaring deficiencies of a subjective assessment that is neither valid nor reliable.

**THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW.COM**

Saturday, September 10, 2005

Letters to the editor

### **WASL not valid**

The article "Spokane can be proud of improving schools" regarding WASL results, states, "it's just another way to measure our progress in educating all students WASL results are just one, very public measure of that progress" (Aug. 30).

Also note, a publication by OSPI (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction) states: "Scores from one test given on a single occasion should never be used to make important decisions about students' placement, the type of instruction they receive, or retention in a given grade level. ..."

But the actual facts are: All students must pass three sections – reading, writing, and math – on the 10th grade WASL to graduate from high school starting with the class of 2008. (Statewide scores for the 2005 10th grade WASL, 2007 graduating class, show 42 percent passed; 58 percent failed at least one section; in Spokane Schools 38.1 percent passed.) And most statewide high school and some middle schools are forced to place "failed WASL students" in "WASL enrichment classes" and eliminate electives.

I agree, our children are learning and achieving knowledge to help them with good overall life skills. Therefore, after eight years, one could easily conclude these "thinking" tests named WASL are neither scientifically valid nor reliable!

**Jesse Schmidt**

*Spokane*

**THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW.COM**

Wednesday, September 14, 2005

Letters to the editor

### **WASL too nebulous**

In Bergeson/Benzel's guest column, Aug. 30, they were so busy patting each other on the back, they failed to give the details the readers needed ("Spokane can be proud of improving schools," Aug. 30).

I scored the fourth-grade writing this summer. Have you ever tried to put a number (1, 2, 3, or 4) on pieces that are as varied as people writing them? Writing is a subjective activity. There is no clear right/wrong answer.

After two nine-hour days of training, I, like my cohorts, spent a week guessing what Pearson Measurement wanted on more than 500 essays. I did figure out that Superintendent Bergeson wanted higher scores. This was no problem, because I wanted to score them higher anyway.

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The anchor papers intended to help actually confused most scorers.

In September, the results are received as a bar graph. Comparisons show percentages of students in different districts making or not making the standard. Winners and losers are clearly illustrated, but few educators, much less parents or students, know what it means. For sure, it doesn't tell anyone what needs to be learned.

Expensive assessments are mandated while worthwhile programs are cut. Then we have bureaucrats that try to sell us on their validity. Superintendent Bergeson doesn't get my vote.

**Linda Bauer**  
*Spokane*

**THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW.COM**

Tuesday, September 20, 2005

Letters to the editor

### **Fuzzy math on WASL kudos**

I have seen the recent articles with Terry Bergeson lauding the "increased scores" and "improvements" shown by state schools in the recent round of WASL testing (mostly due to a lowering of the pass levels) ("Spokane can be proud of improving schools," Aug. 30). These articles have appeared in most of the state's major newspapers. I'm afraid Ms. Bergeson is using some very fuzzy math if she thinks Washington state schools are doing even a "good" job.

Consider this: Different accounting measures place the state's overall graduation rate at about 70 percent (much, much worse for individual minority groups). Only about 35 percent of those students are prepared and able to perform at a college freshman level (i.e., they actually have a 12th-grade education), according to the Evergreen Freedom Foundation. Out of 100 students, that's only 25 students [ $100 \times .70 = 70$ ;  $70 \times .35 = 24.5$  (rounded up = 25)].

Washington state schools are failing to provide a 12th-grade education to a whopping 75 percent of students! Would you like fries with that?

If you had a car that ran only 25 percent of the time no matter how much money you poured into it, you would junk it in a hurry.

**Shannon Hensley**  
*Colville*

**THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW.COM**

Friday, October 07, 2005

Letters to the editor

### **Child-centered education**

I'm impressed that District 81 is "conducting empirical research" on the effect of coaches in raising WASL scores. Anyone who has completed principals of scientific research knows a study

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should include a "control group" (schools not utilizing the coaching model). I wonder which schools?

When WASL scores rise, there may be many factors that are "variables." A good scientific study should strive to identify as many influencing factors as possible. Could changes in scoring standards that occurred recently for the WASL have any effect? Perhaps the scores rising may also be attributable to the increased familiarity and comfort with the format. Any parent can tell from their child's homework that this format appears a significant part of daily instruction. Might the fact that this year's 10th graders must pass the WASL to graduate influence scores?

It seems raising test scores has become the focus at the expense of a more child-centered approach to education. I hope that we don't lose sight of the idea that there may be other important things we can teach our children besides what is measured on the WASL and that adding to the cadre of over 100 coaches doesn't take resources from other priorities.

**Randy Thies**

*Colbert*

**THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW.COM**

Saturday, October 08, 2005

Letters to the editor

### **WASL a solid assessment**

In June, I embarked on an expedition to grade and a mission to reverse engineer the 10th grade writing WASL. As an English teacher, I was biased against, and politically opposed to, standardized testing. To my shock and chagrin, I discovered an assessment process that fairly and accurately measures student ability to exercise the essentials of the writing process.

Furthermore, I became convinced that a student's failure to meet the state's minimum standards evidences a failure to achieve those skills necessary to compete in the 21st century.

In her letter of Sept. 14 ("WASL too nebulous"), Linda Bauer complained about her WASL-correcting experience, opining that writing is a subjective activity which cannot be objectively graded. Sadly, Ms. Bauer failed to grasp the key component of WASL grading. The WASL assesses skill mastery; subjective thoughts are not evaluated.

As graders, our scores were calibrated and weighed against other evaluators who, unbeknownst to us, had previously graded the same exams. Scores were electronically tracked and hand evaluated by trained professionals. The subjectivity and professionalism of the process was extraordinary. I am confident that WASL results accurately disclose student weaknesses which must be corrected before a student is granted a high school diploma.

**David Smith**

Spokane

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**THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW.COM**

Wednesday, October 12, 2005

Letters to the editor

### **WASL flunks the test**

"Teach to the test" is happening everywhere as pressure is put on schools to raise the percentage of students "meeting standard" and, the latest threat, get a diploma.

Electives are being replaced with classes focusing on the WASL. Where is the well-rounded education? Instead of creating or enhancing individuality, the WASL expects all students to be the same. The test doesn't take into account the child that has problems taking tests or the special education child.

Children have to give explanations how they arrive at answers. How about if the answer is wrong and they still get full credit because their explanation was good? This is how the WASL is scored. How is this helping our children with their future? Businesses want a right or wrong answer, not a big explanation for a question.

The state of Minnesota paid \$12 million to students and parents because of scoring errors and withholding diplomas. Washington state is headed in the same direction. The Office of Superintendent of Public Education has taken over our schools and it's time to tell them we are tired of their threats. We want our schools back and our teachers to have individual freedom to teach. Visit [www.mothersagainstawsl.org](http://www.mothersagainstawsl.org).

**Janet Luft**

*Endicott, Wash.*

**THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW.COM**

Monday, October 17, 2005

Letters to the editor

### **WASL is harmful**

As parents who viewed the Washington Assessment of Student Learning tests, we clearly see that "subjective thoughts are evaluated" or significant portions of the test(s) would have to go unscored. Definitely, the WASL assesses thinking and contains idealistic prompts.

We were shocked to discover that the WASL writing portion is actually the "Iowa test" with improbable prompts. Yes, you read correctly! Washington state already had a valid, proven, inexpensive writing assessment with "realistic" prompts on the ITBS/ITED Iowa test(s). Could this be a part of the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's reasoning for illegally keeping these exams secretive? Beware, each new question costs \$20,000!

Furthermore, overlooked are the diverse learning styles, and that some students just don't do well on written exams. Accordingly, Washington state PTA President Linda Hanson advocates that "kids learn in different ways and their academic skills should be measured in different ways, not just through the same high stakes test."

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A continual learning process, not passing a mandatory test, accomplishes preparing students for the 21st century. The WASL has become an overall educational strategy, steadily promoting poor curriculum and bad educational practices statewide, consequently depriving Washington's children of a well-rounded education. Therefore, Washingtonians must step up and require the demise of WASL requirements!

**Dennis and Rebecca Venable**  
*Cheney*

**THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW.COM**

Saturday, November 26, 2005

Letters to the editor

### **Wasted money on WASL**

Once again Terry Bergeson is going to the Legislature to ask for money to support the flawed WASL ("Kids may need summer school to graduate," Nov. 17). This time the amount is \$42 million. At least this time there is an admission that at least half of the 10th graders have not been passing the WASL and this money is to provide summer school instruction to help them pass the next time they take the test.

When will the Legislature finally say no to pouring money down the black hole known as the WASL? Let's give the millions to the schools for curriculum, teachers and materials. There are computerized test alternatives that many districts are already using that supply far more information to the schools and teachers than the WASL can and in a much shorter time frame. Parents, educate yourselves on the WASL and the consequences to your children.

**Claire A. Snodgrass**  
*Nine Mile Falls*

**THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW.COM**

Tuesday, November 29, 2005

Letters to the editor

### **Stop WASL secrecy**

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) has furtively destroyed all WASL tests before 2004. They plan to continue this practice by destroying 2004 and 2005 tests soon. After the destruction of these tests, parents will have no means to see if their child's tests are accurately scored. To see your child's WASL, send a request including SSID number to: OSPI, Assessments, PO Box 47200, Olympia, WA 98504-7200.

Pearson Education Measurement, the testing company who develops and scores WASL tests, made costly mistakes in other states, which activated denying diplomas to deserving students. These errors confirm that we cannot trust nor rely on the scoring.

Furthermore, some parents who have viewed their children's tests found inconsistencies and requested corrections. Currently, requests to correct errors are being overlooked. Consequently, OSPI cannot ignore such requests as they are duty-bound by federal and state regulations, plus accountable to all citizens of Washington.

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Washingtonians must demand "open" testing practices, which guarantee student and parent rights. Accordingly, measures that require immediate action to terminate the despotic and improper destruction of student's educational records and end restricting parent rights.

Please help! Stop this madness for your children's sake! Contact your senator and your representatives today!

**Jordan Sullivan**  
*Spokane Valley*

**THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW.COM**

Sunday, December 04, 2005

Letters to the editor

### **Faith in WASL misplaced**

State Superintendent Terry Bergeson declares she plans to push for another \$42 million for WASL summer school, hoping to give students a boost to pass the 10th grade WASL.

Last spring 57.7 percent failed at least one section statewide. She seems to think passing the same single test will make a student ready for the real world. If, in fact, WASL were such a good assessment, it would not require the majority of students five attempts to pass it. May I remind Dr. Bergeson that doing the same thing over and over, even with more money, and expecting different results is the definition of insanity!

Furthermore, she states, "We can't hide the fact that we gave diplomas last year to kids who couldn't read." Unacceptable! Every student should acquire reading skills. If Bergeson were truly concerned with students' reading abilities and teaching proficient reading skills, she would aim her efforts toward applying proven and reliable reading programs, not the ones currently promoted. In addition, she would provide supplementary reading teachers and give these teachers the tools, resources and support needed to accomplish this responsibility.

Perhaps, Bergeson, it is time to rethink your priorities and redirect your focus.

**Becky Venable**  
*Cheney*

**THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW.COM**

Tuesday, December 06, 2005

Letters to the editor

### **WASL not worth it**

How much more must we tolerate? Again, the Washington State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Terry Bergeson, is asking for more. And for what? For summer school for high school students who do not pass the WASL ("WASL has students in suspense," Nov. 26).

To date the Washington Assessment of Student Learning has cost Washington taxpayers a total of \$151.2 million. Now another \$42 million to fund summer programs for high school students

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who cannot pass a test that has never been validated; a test that costs \$72 per student per administration; a test that causes the curriculum to be narrowed at the expense of the very students who most likely will have to retake the test.

Why? Because those students engaged in traditional vocational programs are those who are finding those offerings reduced or eliminated from typical high school curriculums. Even if they are offered, these students may not have the opportunity to take them because they are forced by their Individual Student Learning Plan to drop these courses in favor of remedial WASL classes!

Washingtonians, I urge you to write your legislators and tell them "enough is enough!"

**Bob DeBuhr**

*Clarkston*

**THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW.COM**

Friday, December 09, 2005

Letters to the editor

### **Enough with the WASL**

Local school districts blame the state. The state blames the feds (No Child Left Behind). The feds blame local districts because kids graduate with low skills.

So we spend millions, and countless hours, to administer the WASL. We fine-tune instruction and are now considering additional state dollars specifically to help remediate those not passing the first time. Will we offer a special summer WASL camp? Will they give up electives like drama, photography and such for special WASL remediation classes?

Several years back District 81 announced the lofty goal of 100 percent passing the WASL by 2013. Recently, OSPI announced guidelines which districts will spend additional resources trying to figure out how special education students (14 percent) will be assessed. Interesting link: [www.k12.wa.us/SpecialEd/assessment.aspx](http://www.k12.wa.us/SpecialEd/assessment.aspx). Click "Guidelines ...". What Developmentally Appropriate WASL will earn them their diploma? Will 10th graders take the seventh grade WASL and get a "Certificate of Individual Achievement"? Or be held to a different standard on the regular WASL?

It seems the WASL tail is wagging the educational dog. I'm left wondering when we will get to the point where enough is enough. I encourage you to write your legislator. Let them know what you think. Woof, woof! Wag, wag!

**Randy D. Thies**

*Colbert*