

A Decade of Progress: The Transformation of Washington Schools

Prior to the reform movement of the past decade in Washington, classrooms, schools and school districts operated as independent providers. For instance, each teacher operated in his/her classroom as though there were no other classes in the school. Schools functioned as separate organizations in a loose confederation of a school district. The curriculum was driven by textbooks purchased by schools and also by what teachers thought was important. The system was closed and little transparency was provided to parents and the public. There were no effective assessment systems beyond the use of a standardized test given at three grades annually and some teacher-developed assessment instruments of varying quality. Accountability was in the form of “we know what we are doing and what is best for your children.”

Students progressed through the system whether or not they were able to do grade-level work. In fact, 40 percent or more of elementary students did not learn to read effectively by the end of third grade. In high school, students graduated based on seat time and the accumulation of credits measured by “Carnegie Units.” In reality, approximately 60 percent or less of the students could do grade-level work, with about 25 percent capable of doing advanced complex work. Graduation rates were hard to determine since no regular statistics were gathered; however, projections were set at 60 percent.

The people in the system were focused on caring for the children, keeping them safe and doing the best they could under the circumstances as they perceived them. The majority of students were not expected to achieve high levels of academic performance. People within the system were working hard with no formal method of determining the effectiveness of their performance. Finger pointing was common. Blame was often attributed to unmotivated or incapable students, unsupportive parents or the family’s social-economic status.

What has changed in Washington state? House Bill 1209 established a transformational concept of what the focus of basic education should be. The new focus is on results; that is, student performance outcomes. The foundation of a standards-based system was enacted. The state established what all, or nearly all, students should know and be able to do in the form of Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs). These standards reflected grade-level work. The second component of the foundation is the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), which is a system of assessments designed to determine whether students meet the standards. Students now have to meet the standards as reflected on the tenth-grade WASL as one component for state graduation. Finally, the results of the assessment system are transparent. The public receives a report annually on the progress every school in the state is making toward the goal of all, or nearly all, students successfully meeting the standards and graduating. The transformation of Washington’s schools is well underway.

School boards in a standards-based environment have had to refocus on academic achievement. Prior to this transformation, school boards spent their time on

management policy. **Today, boards and superintendents work together to focus the entire district on student learning and performance.**

Classrooms, schools and districts have become data driven. Most school districts have an assessment system that is more comprehensive, providing multiple indicators of student progress. This system in the most effective districts begins as students enter kindergarten and continues through at least tenth grade. The assessment system provides teachers with immediate information on the skills that students have and those they need. Students are assessed regularly during the year so that teachers get feedback on their instructional practices and make any appropriate instructional adjustments immediately. A primary example of this system in action is the Reading First schools. These schools have concentrations of low income students. Prior to the introduction of the Reading First program, less than 20 percent of the students read at grade level by the end of third grade. Today in most of these schools, 90 percent of these children are reading on grade level as measured by the DIBELS reading assessment.

Teachers at all levels are using data to make more effective decisions about instruction. They have transformed practices into a process of continuous instructional improvement focused on each child.

School and district curricula have become much more rigorous and aligned with the state standards. Textbooks and personal preferences no longer drive the curriculum of the classroom and schools. More and more districts are using research-based curriculum materials; this is particularly evident with reading and writing. However, progress has also been made in math and science curricula as well. The most effective schools have opened Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes to all students and have increased the enrollment in those courses by three times the original number. This year, Bellevue School District reported 80 percent of all seniors had taken at least one AP or IB course. Bellevue's goal is to have all high school students take at least one AP or IB course during their high school careers. Five years ago, Kamiakin High School in Kennewick had less than 200 students enrolled in AP courses, this fall over 600 students are enrolled. Similar increases have been noted in Franklin Pierce, Bellingham, Spokane, Mabton and many other school districts.

Quality instruction is supported by strong professional development (training programs).

Prior to the reform movement, teachers chose professional development opportunities in which they were interested with little regard to what the teacher next door chose. Today, most school districts focus their staff development programs on specific curriculum areas with literacy as the primary focus. Because the work of teaching is now dependent on teachers being connected to each other, professional development must be targeted to groups of teachers. Coaching models have proven to be very effective. However, this process requires resources beyond what is currently funded through basic education. I-728 funds are frequently used to support districts professional development process.

Another primary focus of targeted professional development in the most successful districts is instructional leadership for administrators and teacher leaders. Most superintendents and principals were initially trained to be effective managers. They have to be effective managers; but in a standards-based system, they also have to be instructional leaders. They have to understand what quality instruction is and regularly monitor classrooms to ensure that quality instruction is occurring. A model system of instructional leadership is found in the Kennewick School District. It is designed on the concept that regular study of quality instruction will improve practice in all the classrooms in the district. In Kennewick, outstanding teachers agree to be videotaped and studied by their peers. They also open their classes to regular classroom visits by other teachers and administrators. Similar instructional leadership programs have been developed in Clover Park, Spokane, Bellevue, Nooksack Valley, Moses Lake, Prosser, Grandview, Highline and many other school districts.

Each student achieving high standards has become the focus of our schools and districts. Classrooms are no longer independent of the school. Schools have become collaborative organizations where teacher teams focus on the common good of all students. This means that teachers often sacrifice personal desires for the betterment of the team performance. Schools are becoming learning communities where teachers and administrators seek the best strategies and practices and learn from their own performance and data how to become more effective. Districts are no longer a loose confederation of independent schools; they share ideas and practices in an integrated system. Districts have changed from being compliance centered organizations to becoming service centered by providing the resources to schools to help them become effective learning systems for both students and adults.

This process of transformation has changed how schools do their work. In many elementary schools, reading becomes a school-wide effort. Every adult in the school—from the front office staff to the classroom teacher—participates in reading instruction for a prescribed time period. This way, children can be organized in small groups for personalized and diagnostic instruction. Some groups are as small as two or three students with one teacher but are no larger than 10 or 11 students during a full hour of targeted instruction. The Reading First schools model this type of instruction using small-class sizes to target specialized instruction.

At the high school level, many districts and schools have eliminated all remedial classes. All students are in regular grade-level English and math classes. Those students who need support to be successful in these classes receive a second period with the same teacher, but in a class of 15 or less. To accomplish this goal, schools must restructure their resources to create small class sizes for targeted instruction. The resources needed to provide targeted small-group instruction are not provided in the state basic education funding to school districts. Districts have scrutinized discretionary spending, searched for efficiencies and utilized I-728 funding to provide this type of instruction. Getting all students to high standards is very difficult, complex and expensive work, but it is being done.

Providing extended time for struggling students is another effective strategy. One example that may prove to have the greatest impact is full-day kindergarten which has shown success in Bremerton and Walla Walla. Many other districts have implemented full- or extended-day kindergarten for high-risk students. Extended-day programs for elementary, middle and high school have been implemented in many districts and schools throughout the state to assist struggling students who need extra time on task to meet the standards. Schools have used many approaches to extended time. Some districts have implemented programs for a semester only. Others have added programs on both ends of the day. The expansion of summer school programs to focus on the specific learning needs of students has been occurring in most districts. One example is Kennewick, which went from having a few hundred students in summer programs to approximately 2,000 students. With the exception of the introduction of the Promoting Academic Success (PAS) program for tenth graders this summer, the state's basic K-12 operating budget has not provided for extended-time programs. I-728 has been the primary source of funding, along with local levies, for targeted extended-day programs including the extension of kindergarten to a full day.

The proof of the effectiveness of the transformation of the Washington public school system is the academic achievement of the students over the past decade, but particularly the last five years. **The table below shows the growth the state has made in students' academic performance since the first test administration.** Five years ago, few educators would have predicted today's results.

WASL Results: A Comparison of the First Year Administered to the Most Recent Results

Year	Grade	Reading	Math	Writing
96-97	4th	48%	21%	43%
2004-05	4th	80%	61%	58%
97-98	7th	38%	33%	42%
2004-05	7th	69%	51%	61%
98-99	10th	51%	33%	41%
2005-06*	10th	86%	54%	84%

*Preliminary results

There are other indicators of this transformation as well. **More students are enrolled in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses than ever before.** The College Board cites Washington as one of the top five states in the nation in the growth of Advanced Placement test-taking. High schools and middle schools are eliminating traditional remedial courses and are developing support strategies to keep all students in grade-level classes. More students are taking three and four years of math and science. Ninety percent of the students in the Reading First program are reading at grade level by the end of third grade. Schools are moving honors curricula materials into regular classrooms to engage all students in more rigorous work.

Prior to education reform, the items that cost money remained constant—time and resources. Learning happened in one-hour chunks for 180 days. Staffing formulas determined class size. Budgeting was reasonably predictable. In short, while it may have been a financially “efficient” system, there was no assessment system in place to link dollars spent with improved student learning.

Today, we are building a system that holds student achievement to a consistently high standard for all students. Time and resources are much less predictable. The ability for districts to supplement state funds with local funding varies widely. We are moving from an inexpensive, financially “efficient” system—one that failed to meet the needs of students academically—to a system that is academically efficient but much more dependent upon additional time and resources. As a result, it is more expensive to stay with a student until he/she understands a concept or masters a skill than to give that student a D+ and move on.

Paul Rosier, Ed.D., Executive Director, Washington Association of School Administrators

Martharose Laffey, Executive Director, Washington State School Directors Association

Gary Kipp, Executive Director, Association of Washington School Principals