

January 2001

**Educational Opportunities in Washington's
High Schools Under State Education Reform:
Background and Student Outcomes
VOLUME 1**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The 2000 Washington State Legislature requested that the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) conduct a study on public high school programs in Washington:

The study shall examine what high school educational opportunities are currently available for students. Information shall be gathered on program attributes, student demographics, and outcomes for high school programs including, but not limited to, college credit (e.g. advanced placement and running start), tech prep, distance learning, and career pathways.¹

The Institute must report its findings on public high school opportunities and programs to the Legislature in an interim report due January 1, 2001, with a final report due September 15, 2001.

This interim report provides background for the study with a special emphasis on high school student outcomes and performance. The final report will focus on educational opportunities and programs provided by Washington State public high schools and how these opportunities and programs are changing as a result of the state's education reform.

The key research questions addressed in this interim report are:

- **National Trends: *Why Reform High School?***
- **Public High Schools in Washington: *What Are Their Characteristics, and What Are the State's Policies?***
- **High School Student Performance: *What Do We Know?***

¹ Chapter 1, Laws of 2000 (EHB 2487 §607(4)).

National Trends: Why Reform High School?

- Over the last two decades, the traditional American high school has come under criticism for lacking a clear curricular focus, not expecting high achievement for all students, and not providing personalized learning environments to engage students.
- A variety of reforms of high school are being tried across the country. Some focus on creating a demanding and standards-based curriculum, others on encouraging students to link what they learn in school with their future educational and career plans, and still others on changing the school environment. The aims of some reforms appear contradictory. Some reforms attempt to accomplish multiple objectives.
- The challenge in sorting through this information for high school administrators and policymakers is to determine which reforms matter, which will work in their communities, and which will address educational needs, not just of some students, but of all students.

Public High Schools in Washington: What Are Their Characteristics, and What Are the State's Policies?

- Seventy-two percent (291) of Washington's 406 high schools have students in "standard high schools" with grades 9 through 12 or 10 through 12. Of these 291 standard high schools, 45 percent have enrollments of over 1,000 students. The average size of standard high schools is 912 students. Twenty-three percent of all high school students are people of color.
- The legislature and the State Board of Education (SBE) are responsible for setting policies for high school requirements. Current policies address the following topics: compulsory attendance, subject standards, assessments, Certificate of Mastery, educational pathways, and subjects and competencies needed for graduation.
- Over the last 30 years, the state has asserted more control over local school districts by establishing policies that follow national trends, such as increased graduation requirements and standards-based reform for all students. Standards-based reform in Washington shifts the expectations for high schools; they will be required to ensure all students, not just college-bound students, master high-level standards.
- Significant questions remain unanswered. Will high school change for 11th and 12th grade students through widespread use of educational pathways, culminating projects, and student plans? Will students who complete the Certificate of Mastery decide to leave school and start college or a job? Will students who cannot master the proficiencies on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) drop out of school, pursue an alternative credential, or spend 11th and 12th grades in remediation?

High School Student Performance: What Do We Know?

How much education do Washington students attain?

- The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction's annual dropout rate for 1998-99 ranged from 4 percent for 9th graders to 7 percent for 12th graders. The Institute found that 24 percent of the 1995-96 9th grade class, expected to graduate in 1998-99, could not be located. This finding indicates that annual dropout rates might underestimate the cumulative percentage of students who do not complete school over a four-year period.
- An estimated three-quarters of youth under age 19 in Washington graduate "on time." These percentages have remained constant for the last 35 years.
- Young adults continue to finish high school after age 18. The Office of Financial Management's State Population Survey (1997) estimates that 91 percent of young adults aged 25 to 29 have completed high school.
- Sixty-five percent of young adults aged 25 to 29 in Washington have had some additional education after high school. Of these young adults, 9 percent received an associate's degree, and 31 percent received a bachelor's degree or higher.
- Approximately 18 percent of Washington's high school juniors and seniors took college-level learning classes (i.e., Running Start, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and College in the High School) in which students earn both high school and college credit) in 1998.

How well do Washington students learn?

- The percentage of 10th graders who passed the WASL in 1999-00 included: 60 percent in reading, 35 percent in math, 32 percent in writing, and 78 percent in listening.
- Students of African American, Hispanic, and Native American backgrounds were less likely to pass the 10th grade WASL than Caucasian or Asian American students in 1999-2000.
- Over the last five years (1995-99), Washington students had higher average SAT verbal and math scores than the national average. Washington students' average SAT verbal and math scores have also increased during those five years.
- First-year college students in 1999 received more college credit from Running Start while in high school than from Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or College in the High School courses.
- Former Running Start students entering college in 1999 had high school GPAs above 3.0. During their first year in college, they had GPAs above 2.7.

- According to the 1998 High School *Graduate Follow-Up Study*, 51 percent of college students enrolled in Washington's two-year community and technical colleges and 22 percent enrolled in four-year public universities (excluding Western and Evergreen) took at least one remedial course.
- The percentage of college students who passed the math placement tests in 2000 at four-year public universities ranged from 32 percent to 66 percent.

What are the barriers to learning more about high school student performance?

- Reported dropout rates lack accuracy because there has been no uniform student identifier to match students who may have transferred to another school or dropped out and re-entered school. OSPI expects to have a voluntary statewide uniform student identifier ready to test in the 2001-02 school year.
- Currently, it is not possible to assess individual gains in student performance through a statewide test that measures the students' annual progress.
- With the exception of vocational courses, the state does not collect records on the kinds of courses high school students take to assess the changes in levels of coursework (e.g., remediation and advance placement).
- *The Graduate Follow-Up Study* cannot provide a complete and accurate picture of what happens to high school graduates because there are limitations on matching graduates to college and employment databases.
- Four-year public higher education institutions use different methods to provide data. Some institutions' data cannot be compared over time, such as cumulative GPA.
- The quality of policy-relevant outcome data on high school students is mixed and does not currently provide state policymakers with a solid baseline to determine what impacts education reform will have on Washington's high school students.

Next Steps

The Institute's final report will create a baseline to document what high school educational opportunities and programs are currently available for students and whether these are changing as a result of education reform.

- Eight case studies and a statewide survey will document the strategies high schools are using to help students master the proficiencies described in the state's learning goals: the Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) and the Washington Assessment for Student Learning (WASL).
- How high schools use educational pathways and other learning opportunities (such as culminating projects and portfolio assessment) will be explored.

- Available information (e.g., national studies, state reports, field data, and other resources) will be summarized regarding educational programs, such as Advanced Placement, Tech-Prep, School-to-Work, and vocational education.
- Student enrollment in selected courses (e.g., college-level learning, math courses, distance learning, and vocational courses) will also be documented.

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