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**Educational Opportunities in Washington's
High Schools Under State Education Reform:
High School Responses to Expectations for Change
VOLUME 2**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The 2000 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to study 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 published an interim report in January 2001, and this is the final report. To complete the reports, the Institute conducted a statewide survey of public high schools; interviewed educators, students, and parents at eight case study schools; reviewed national research literature; and analyzed state and national data.

Overview: What Is Expected of Washington's Public High Schools?

Expectations From the State. Washington's education reform represents a shift in expectations: high schools will be required to ensure that *all* students, not just college-bound students, master high-level standards. The Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) define what all students are expected to know and do, and the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) measures student performance on some of those standards. By 2008, high school students will be expected to pass the WASL to earn a Certificate of Mastery, but this is not the only requirement for graduation. High schools are also expected to provide educational pathways for students to explore and prepare for educational and career opportunities after high school.

Expectations Based on National Criticisms of High Schools. Nationally, high schools have been criticized for insufficient academic rigor in the curriculum or graduation requirements. Employers say high schools are not adequately preparing students to enter the workforce or be employed in a changing economy. Surveys of students indicate they are not motivated toward academic achievement and believe what they learn in school is not relevant to their current interests or future plans.

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

The following questions are addressed in this final report:

- **Are High Schools Increasing the Rigor of What Students Learn?**
- **Are High Schools Making Learning More Relevant for Students?**
- **Are High Schools Providing Learning Options for 11th and 12th Grades?**

Are High Schools Increasing the Rigor of What Students Learn?

Most high schools that responded to the Institute's survey are increasing rigor by focusing on state standards and changing graduation requirements.

- Study participants report a positive impact from having the EALRs serve as a common framework for curriculum and instruction.
- More than 80 percent of high schools reported some or a lot of change to the 9th and 10th grade curriculum to incorporate the EALRs into courses.
- More than 60 percent of high schools reported extensive curriculum changes in English and math. Less activity is occurring in subjects that are not yet tested on the WASL.
- To align with state standards, nearly two-thirds of high schools are actively or very actively making multiple changes in curriculum and assessment.
- Just over 60 percent of high schools report recent or planned changes in local graduation requirements, including adding credits in English and math and requiring culminating projects.

However, the effect of this increased rigor is unknown, particularly for students who will have difficulty meeting state standards.

- Half the high schools reported creating new courses to assist 9th and 10th grade students in preparing for the WASL. Because the WASL is not yet a graduation requirement, less than 30 percent of high schools are creating remedial courses for students who do not pass the WASL in 10th grade.
- To assist struggling students, more than 70 percent of high schools reported some or a lot of use of alternative programs, extended learning, early identification of at-risk students, and in-class assistance. None of these strategies is used extensively by more than one-third of high schools.
- High schools are concerned about remediation and its possible impact on the curriculum and learning options for students. It is not known what effect increased expectations will have on high school dropout rates.
- Parents, educators, and students express concerns about relying on the WASL as a graduation requirement. Students in the case study schools admitted they do not take the WASL seriously.

- Of the 27 other states planning a standards-based assessment for high school graduation, some have delayed their timelines and others are creating alternative ways for students to earn a diploma.

Are High Schools Making Learning More Relevant for Students?

Most high schools responding to the survey are developing portfolios, culminating projects, educational pathways, and educational plans to help students plan for the transition after high school.

- Two-thirds of high schools currently use portfolios and just over half currently use culminating projects. Under new graduation requirements adopted by the State Board of Education (SBE), all students will complete a culminating project in 2008.
- Two-thirds of high schools report they provide educational pathways where students can choose courses and explore future options around a career theme.
- Nearly 60 percent of high schools have students prepare a plan for their high school education, and more than 70 percent have students develop a post-high school plan. In 2008, all students will prepare these plans under SBE graduation requirements.
- Nearly 60 percent of high schools are actively or very actively implementing portfolios, projects, pathways, and plans simultaneously.
- About half of high schools are trying to create smaller learning communities by organizing small cohorts of students and teachers.

However, more work is needed if these activities are to reach all students. The degree of implementation varies.

- In one-third of high schools responding to the survey, all seniors prepare culminating projects.
- Less than one-fourth of high schools reporting the use of portfolios, projects, or educational pathways currently involve all students in these activities.
- Forty percent of schools are actively or very actively implementing educational pathways through such strategies as staff training, course modification, and creating special projects and activities for students.
- The case studies suggest that, to be effective, activities to make learning more relevant must be integrated throughout the high school curriculum. High schools report it takes a great deal of time, effort, and commitment to achieve integration and make activities meaningful for students.

National research is not conclusive about whether portfolios, culminating projects, or educational pathways are effective.

- The success of strategies to make learning more relevant and assist students with transitions may have to be measured by examining students' educational and career pathways after graduation. However, there is currently no complete and accurate way to identify what happens to high school graduates in Washington.

Are High Schools Providing Learning Options for 11th and 12th Grades?

Most learning options identified in statute for 11th and 12th grades are readily available in high schools across the state.

- The statute pertaining to the Certificate of Mastery lists a number of learning options for 11th and 12th grade students, such as Advanced Placement, Running Start, Tech Prep, and vocational-technical education. More than two-thirds of high schools report that at least five out of eight 11th and 12th grade learning options are readily available or available with minor difficulty.
- Running Start and Tech Prep are the most accessible options, with more than 60 percent of high schools reporting ready availability. College in the High School and distance learning are the least available options (readily available in less than 30 percent of high schools).

However, less is known about the extent of student participation in these options. National and state research do not provide a clear indication that one option is more effective than others.

- Enrollment of Washington high school students in college-level learning (Advanced Placement, Running Start, and College in the High School) is growing and could total one-quarter of the state's 11th and 12th grade students. Some groups of students (Caucasian, Asian-American) are more likely to enroll in college-level learning than others.
- Baseline data suggest that 15 percent of graduates complete a sequence of vocational courses or take college-level training through Tech Prep.
- Data about student participation in work-based learning, distance learning, and alternative education is not comprehensive.
- Studies have found some positive results (using a variety of measures) for students who participate in Running Start, take integrated academic-vocational courses, complete a sequence of vocational courses, or participate in School-to-Work activities. Each option attracts different students based on their interests and plans.

It is not clear how the Certificate of Mastery will influence learning options for 11th and 12th grades.

- High schools are concerned that providing additional assistance for students who do not pass the WASL in 10th grade could limit their ability to offer activities and options for students.
- Although the Certificate of Mastery is not the only requirement for high school graduation, it is the most clearly defined and highly publicized expectation for high schools and students.
- Additional measures of state accountability for high schools have not been developed.

What Additional Steps Could Policymakers Take to Influence Education Reform in High Schools?

Based on the research literature and study findings, the Institute cannot recommend any single program or activity over others for state funding and support. However, policymakers have the following opportunities to influence further implementation of education reform in high schools:

- **Monitor trends or decisions regarding:**
 - What happens to high school dropout rates.
 - What happens to students after they graduate.
 - How the SBE assures that all students have an opportunity to learn state standards before the WASL becomes a graduation requirement.

- **Obtain additional information regarding:**
 - What models of assistance to struggling students are successful in high schools.
 - Enrollment and effectiveness of alternative education programs and strategies.
 - How successful are grant-funded initiatives to create smaller learning communities in high schools.

- **Debate or discuss further:**
 - Whether adjustments or alternatives to the WASL should be explored.
 - Level of state direction, guidance, or assistance for culminating projects, educational plans, and educational pathways.
 - Whether high schools should be held accountable by the state for other student outcomes in addition to the Certificate of Mastery.