In Washington, education reform efforts began in earnest more than a decade ago. These changes called for academic standards for every grade, assessments that measure whether students are learning the standards and a system to hold everyone accountable for what really matters: student learning.

Because the world is changing dramatically, we must ensure that every child in Washington can read, write and do math and science. It’s a goal that is both ambitious and humble. It is ambitious because it embraces every single child. It is humble because it’s about the basics.

Standards

Q: Why do we need learning standards?
A: With common standards, poverty and race will no longer be the strongest predictors of achievement. Standards define the learning expectations from classroom to classroom, grade to grade and school to school. Within the standards, essential skills have been identified to ensure high school graduates can make informed choices as productive members of society.

Q: Who created the standards and the WASL?
A: Educators develop and approve the standards. They develop, refine and score the WASL. Parents, employers and community leaders also give input on the skills our graduates need.

Assessments

Q: What’s on the WASL?
A: The reading, writing, math and science WASL each includes a blend of multiple-choice, short-answer and essay questions. In addition to demonstrating content knowledge, students must apply their thinking skills to solve problems and explain their answers. View actual questions and student answers at www.partnership4learning.org.

Timeline

1993: Legislature adopts HB 1209, the Education Reform Act, which establishes common learning goals for all Washington students and calls for academic standards, an assessment system and the Certificate of Mastery.

1993-96: Academic standards are developed in eight core academic subjects with benchmarks at grades 4, 7 and 10.

1997: All fourth-graders—the class of 2008—take WASL.

2000: State Board of Education decides that the class of 2008 will meet new statewide graduation requirements, which will include the Certificate of Mastery, Culminating Project, High School and Beyond Plan and a minimum number of core classes.

2001: All seventh- and 10th-graders take the WASL.

2003-2004: Academic standards are refined and “grade level expectations” are developed for grades K-10 in reading, math and science. Other subjects to be phased in by 2010.

2003-05: Science WASL is phased in for grades 5, 8 and 10.

2004: Legislature passes HB 2195, which recommits to the Certificate of Mastery (name changes to Certificate of Academic Achievement) for the class of 2008. Puts in place supports—multiple retakes, academic help, alternatives.

2006-2008: Class of 2008 takes 10th-grade WASL for the first time. Academic help, retakes and an alternative means available through 2008 to students who don’t pass the WASL on the first try.

2008: First class to meet new statewide graduation standards in order to receive diploma.

2010: Science WASL to be added to the graduation standards.
Q: How do we know it’s a good test?
A: Experts say so. The WASL measures what it’s supposed to measure: student learning of the state’s standards. And its results are reliable. Data show a very high level of agreement among scorers in reading, writing and math. An extremely high likelihood exists that students would get the same score regardless of the scorer.

Q: How are students doing?
A: In all grades, all subject areas and all ethnic groups, more students are meeting standard on the WASL than ever before. Since the WASL began, the number of students meeting or exceeding the math standards has doubled and fewer students are moving through our public schools with little or no math skills.

Q: Does the WASL limit students’ exposure to “non-tested” but equally important subjects?
A: While the WASL tests reading, writing, math and science skills, under state and federal law, schools must also teach and test student skills in art, music, health/fitness and other subjects using the state’s academic standards. Innovative schools and teachers know how to provide a well-rounded education without “sacrificing” subjects. Asking students to apply skills learned in other classes reinforces their understanding of how their education will work in the world.

Q: Are there other assessments besides WASL?
A: Teachers, schools and districts give their own assessments to diagnose students’ strengths and areas for improvement. Used properly, these tests work in tandem with the WASL.

Graduation Requirements

Q: What are the new statewide graduation requirements?
A: Starting with the class of 2008, all Washington public high school students must meet new statewide graduation requirements—in addition to any district or school requirements. Students will complete a Culminating Project on a topic of interest using a variety of skills; map out a High School and Beyond plan to get to graduation and the year after; pass a set of core classes spanning various subjects; and earn a Certificate of Academic Achievement by meeting reading, writing and math standards on the 10th-grade WASL by the end of high school. The science WASL will be added for the classes of 2010 and beyond.

Q: Who will oversee the new requirements?
A: The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction will implement and oversee most elements of the Certificate of Academic Achievement, including all scoring of the 10th-grade WASL. School districts will manage all other local and state requirements.

Q: What supports will help students earn the Certificate of Academic Achievement?
A: HB 2195, passed in 2004, provides:
- Retakes: Students who do not pass the 10th-grade WASL on the first try will have up to four free retake opportunities before the end of their senior year. Students only retake WASL subjects they did not pass.
- Alternative Means: An alternative will be available to students who have the skills but haven’t shown them on the WASL after two tries. The alternative must be “comparable in rigor” to the WASL.
- Extra Help/Student Learning Plans: For every student who does not pass the WASL, schools must provide academic help and develop learning plans to help these students improve their skills and stay on track for graduation. The plans—and student progress—must be shared regularly with parents.

Q: Are special education students included in the requirements?
A: Yes. Accommodations and retakes on the WASL will be available for all special education students. Students with severe cognitive disabilities, who are unable to take the WASL with or without accommodations, are eligible to earn a Certificate of Individual Achievement—instead of the Certificate of Academic Achievement—and still receive a high school diploma. A student’s parents and teachers will determine eligibility for this route to the diploma.

Q: Are English Language Learners included in the requirements?
A: Yes. Accommodations and retakes on the WASL will be available. In addition, the state’s community and technical colleges are developing an assistance program for students who are still learning English, haven’t earned the Certificate by senior year and would find a community college setting more appropriate for them to continue their work toward a Certificate and diploma.

Resources
Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction
www.k12.wa.us • (360) 725-6000

Partnership for Learning
www.partnership4learning.org • (800) 550-5437

State Board of Education
www.sbe.wa.gov • (360) 725-6025