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WASL: the home stretch
By Booth Gardner

The year was 1991. It was a tumultuous time. There had been a statewide teachers strike that year that demonstrated deep divisions between those who demanded better performance from our schools before spending more on them and those who believed improvement was not possible in the absence of more money. We needed a plan to bridge this gap and move forward in a constructive manner.

I appointed a balanced group of prominent education, business, academic and government leaders to recommend a path forward. The group, the Governor's Council on Education Reform and Funding, decided that the state should embark on a reform plan based on development of a standards-based accountability and assessment system. The Legislature agreed and, in 1993, passed House Bill 1209, our landmark education-reform legislation.

Our schools have been working on this plan ever since and this coming spring they reach the home stretch. This year's sophomores, the Class of 2008, are the first who must meet new state graduation requirements, which include passing all three sections of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL).

How well we do as we head down the home stretch is very likely to define the success or failure of all that has been done to improve our schools to date.

The culture in many of our schools has changed. There is more emphasis on academic rigor. Teachers have changed their methods to help their students reach the new standards. Their efforts are paying off. Test scores are up.

But are they up enough? Do we have the right evaluation system in place? And, what about the huge gap in scores between white, affluent students and students from low-income and minority families?

Last year, 42.8 percent of high-school students taking the test passed all three sections of the WASL. More are expected to pass this year, on the assumption that students will take the test more seriously because "now it counts." Most expect the passing rate will hover around 50 percent. Of course, that means that about 50 percent will fail, and it is likely that many of these students will never get their diploma. If, indeed, thousands of students are denied diplomas only because they could not pass the WASL, our school system will be thrown into turmoil by lawsuits, second-guessing and charges of prejudice.

The biggest flaw in our reformed education system is the requirement to pass the WASL to graduate from high school. It is wrong to have a single test that tries to measure all that matters in a young person's education. There are any number of ways students can prove that they are worthy of receiving a diploma. There are all kinds of reasons why a student may or may not be able to show his or her learning and skill level on a single test at a single point in time. Some very capable kids do not test well. We all know kids who are like that.

Let's give students alternative performance measures or options that lead to a diploma and many who would otherwise be branded failures will show they do, in fact, meet high standards. Proven alternative assessments exist and could quickly be incorporated into our system.

One of the most common alternative assessment options is the student portfolio. We have an excellent example showing how portfolios work in our own backyard.

The nonprofit Digital Learning Commons, based in Seattle's University District, is using the University of Washington's Catalyst Learning Tools (www.catalyst.washington.edu) in an electronic-portfolio project involving more than 4,000 high-school students and educators across the state. Electronic portfolios are used for a variety of purposes, including senior projects and advanced course work. Essentially, each student has a Web site and chooses to put relevant work on the site for others to see. This can include written work, videos, musical performances and multimedia presentations. Students choose the work to be placed in their portfolio and offer their own observations about its meaning and value. Teachers can view, comment on and assess student work as it progresses.

It would not take long to transform this project into a viable alternative measurement for demonstrating academic accomplishment on the way to a high-school diploma. Other existing measures could also be used without incurring prolonged delay. For example, measures such as Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) certification or Advanced Placement (AP) tests taken at the high-school level could be reviewed against learning standards and adopted as alternatives to all or part of the WASL.

If we need proof that we should have a set of alternative measures, we have only to look at what other states are doing. Today, of 25 states that began to require some form of high-school exit exam in the 1990s, 17 have added alternative performance measures or options. Eight continue to rely on a single exam. Of the eight, five have experienced declining success.

It is ironic that the force behind the "single test fits all" is the big-business community. Its members apparently believe the only way to judge whether a student has successfully met learning standards is with a single measuring stick, the high-school WASL. Believe me, none of them uses a single indicator to measure the health of their business. They use a "cockpit" of indicators because they are aware that no single measure is sufficient to evaluate their operations.

Of all the problems with the WASL graduation requirement, I believe one looms larger than all the others combined: the almost certain result that those who are denied high-school diplomas will be overwhelmingly poor, African American, Latino and American Indian. If this happens, it will only add fuel to the belief among many in these groups that Washington's education system is "not for us."

All kids can learn. I passionately believe this. And I believe that if some kids are not learning, it is our duty to find out why and what we can do to make our schools truly "schools for all."

As a young man working at Yesler Terrace, Broadway High and Meany Middle School, I saw too many cases where kids of color absorbed the toxic fumes of racism, and came to believe that they weren't as smart or as deserving as their richer, whiter peers. This is the most evil and insidious thing about racism: It poisons the minds of children and makes them underestimate their own potential. Looking at WASL results from the fourth, seventh and 10th grades, it is pretty clear that, as they progress through the grades, many capable students from these backgrounds have either given up on the schools or the schools have given up on them.

Culture and family history also can put a brake on kids' success in school. Undereducated parents often do not expect their children to be academically successful, help them with their homework, or advocate for their children at school. Their children go to school truly alone. Families that for generations have bumped against the barriers of racism may not value education, hard work and self-discipline when these have not worked to make their lives better. If parents don't transmit these values to their children, the results are predictable

There are also causes for the achievement gap inside the walls of many schools. Our public-education system is based on a single dominant European culture. As a result, many students of color feel they are studying in a foreign land. They don't see teachers who look like them. They are not likely to read much about people from their culture or background. If they are Native American, they will probably study civics without ever hearing a word about their own sovereign tribal governments.

Students of color and poor kids are also less likely to have parents who have ongoing relationships with educational policymakers. Affluent, white parents who lobby vigorously for budgets and policies favoring their children typically dominate school board meetings across this state. School boards rarely reach out to migrant and immigrant groups, low-wage working parents or communities of color to solicit their ideas on how the schools can do a better job of educating their children.

There are success stories, in our state and elsewhere, about consistently good results teaching low-income students of color. We need to intensify current efforts to mine the data to find out what they are doing that works. We should make sure that multiple cultural perspectives are examined in all subject areas — from reading to math, history and science — to find approaches that truly reach all students.

Alternative assessments must be part of the effort. We need to look for assessment methods that give kids the best chance to show what they know with the expectation that some of these methods may work better for some groups than for others. For example, studies of English-language learners have shown they are much more likely to be able to demonstrate their skills through portfolio assessments than on pencil-and-paper tests.

Completing school with a high-school diploma that means something must be an achievable goal for every student. Right now, as a result of our state's single-test assessment system and inability to overcome the cultural and racial factors that have produced the achievement gap, we do not meet this standard.

Let's make some adjustments to avoid a foreseeable disaster while we keep moving forward.
Booth Gardner was governor of Washington from 1985 to 1993.

An alternative path to a high-school diploma

Booth Gardner's plan for changing assessments required for a high-school diploma:

- Proceed with plans to give the WASL to this year's sophomores. Many will pass and they should be rewarded for their preparation and hard work.
- Change state law to require development of portfolios or other alternatives for students to demonstrate that they can meet learning standards. This requirement should be tied to standards, not to the WASL.
- Require that students may choose an alternative assessment prior to administration of the 10th-grade WASL.
- Change state law to require that the superintendent of public instruction review tests, such as Advanced Placement exams and career certification tests, to determine whether high-school students who pass them have met state learning standards. These tests would then become alternatives to all or part of the WASL.
- With the University of Washington's College of Education, evaluate existing assessment methods and develop new assessments as needed to provide culturally relevant assessments to students from demographic groups that have significantly more difficulty with the WASL than others.
- With the Digital Learning Commons, evaluate how its current program offering electronic portfolios to more than 4,000 high-school students in the state as part of UW's Program on Educational Transformation Through Technology can be used as an alternative assessment for graduation purposes.