

Senate Bill 5501 – Implementing Washington Learns  
Testimony 1/31/07  
Kim Howard, Washington State PTA

Thank you to the committee for this opportunity to testify. I also want to thank PTA for giving parents like me the opportunity to use our voices to advocate for children. I am a parent of two children, Rachel grade 6 and Nicole grade 2 at Peter G. Schmidt Elementary in Tumwater. In 1992 the inaugural year of education reform I earned a masters degree in social work with a school social work certification and worked as a school social worker in Centralia for the next three years. In 1995, I started my career as mom and a few years later, my PTA volunteer career was launched. Then, in Jan. 2006, I returned to work part time flexible hours out of my home for the risk consulting division of a Denver based insurance brokerage which works exclusively with hospitals. I understand the current economy. I have a 21<sup>st</sup> century job.

I have also closely followed Washington's K-12 education reform efforts and although this bill addresses a broader range of issues, its components come out of an evolution of thought which occurred because of education reform efforts. Put simply, everyone figured out pretty quickly that we need to address our entire learning system, not just K-12 in order to improve student learning outcomes. I applaud this very large bill for the initiatives that it does include in early learning, K-12 and higher ed. The initiatives that increase access to higher ed. are much needed and welcome. My major concern is that many of the initiatives on the early learning and K-12 end, put into the context of education reform, are late and do not go far enough.

Before I get into discussion of some of the bill components, I am going to ask you to step back from this bill and look at it in the context of the bigger picture of where we have come and where we are now with education reform.

Remember that education reform has asked teachers, parents, all of us, to change our world view of children and how we educate them. We moved from a system of expectations that achievement would fall on a bell curve – some would fail, most would be middle achievers and a few would be high achievers, to a system where we expected that all children achieve at the higher end. This is monumental change creating huge challenges. We then developed EALRs and GLEs and asked teachers to teach the standards and students to pass the WASL which tests those standards without first figuring out exactly what they would need to help them accomplish this goal. Many students have made progress, but as we know many others have not made enough. One ongoing concern and problem is that we have asked for accountability from our students and teachers before we even know what it will take for success.

Where does this bill fit in with education reform? What struck me about this bill was the number of studies to be done, demonstrations projects to be reviewed and systems to be developed. One example is the foundation learning program demonstration project which would be implemented in 10 schools in 2007-08. These children would get full day kindergarten, smaller class sizes and instructional coaches for their teachers. This model

seems like a reasonable proposal to improve primary learning. We must however acknowledge that this attempt to look at how we are educating children, instead of just how, when and how much we will test them, is coming very late in our education reform process. What many PTA parents have been asking is how can we be demanding strict accountability of kids in the form of withholding graduation for not passing the WASL when we are still trying to figure out the model to use to educate our children?

I will give a few more examples of shortcomings I see with this bill, which could be related to the theme too little and/or very late.

This bill proposes developing a rating system for current early learning providers. While a rating system has its merits, it will not get more kids into early learning programs. Why aren't we increasing the #s of preschool slots available in known, established programs for low income children, so that more would be better prepared for kindergarten? By introducing a rating system with no mention of increasing the # of slots it seems that we are neglecting to address a significant piece of the problem.

Also, all day kindergarten for as many kids as possible is a great idea. However, phasing it in where there are the highest percentages of low income children still leaves out many kids who could benefit from this program. Also, make sure for the sake of those schools involved that you consider the facilities impact of going from ½ to a full day. Schools I am familiar with have no extra space. Portables will need to be added for older students to free up classrooms for full day kindergarten classes. Will the money be available to help schools bring in needed portables? The same issue will apply if class sizes are reduced. The kids have to go somewhere. We will need to figure out how to pay for additional space.

The after-school mathematics support program will also only help a select few. It is described as a program whereby OSPI will provide grants to selected community-based non-profit orgs that have an existing after-school program that includes support to students in math. I understand the notion that offering grants to this type of program will increase the probability of success, but what about those many small communities that have no after-school programs at all, let alone ones that are already including some math support. Do you think that the grant program will be enough incentive for the market to start more after-school programs? I don't think so. What happens to those kids? How will they get the extra math support that we know is needed?

Many of these initiatives revolve around the idea of creating more and higher quality learning time for students. The idea we applaud. The piecemeal nature of the proposals is the problem.

I now urge you to step back from this bill and think about the classroom for a moment. I have volunteered in the classroom almost every week for 1 to 2 hours for the past 7 years. What I have seen consistently are 3 things: 1. Caring teachers working very hard to teach to a wide variety of learners. 2. Stressed out teachers and stressful environments because teachers feel that they don't have enough time to teach what they need to teach

before the class needs to move on to the next grade level. (Remember, because of the standards and GLEs teachers know what the next teacher is expected to teach. The pressure is on to make sure they complete the work which is expected at their level.)

3. Children who are working hard and making progress, but who may not be making enough progress, quickly enough, to truly feel successful.

From my observations and work with children, I feel that as long as we are holding time a constant we will not get all kids where we want them to be and we will continue to fuel the stressful environments that are not in the best interests of anyone.

All day kindergarten extends time. After-school programs extend time. What worries me is that even these programs are not being extended to all children. But, they also do not go far enough. This is not an official PTA position, but I feel that we need to be thinking about the length of the school day and the length of the school year, for all children. Remember we are asking for monumental change in what we expect of both teachers and students and that stress levels are currently over the top. We won't get the results we desire by tinkering at the edges.

I urge you to spend some time in K-3 classrooms. Sit down and listen to a variety of children read. Watch them write and do math. See how much time they have to complete one assignment before they have to transition to the next. Feel the climate in the classroom. Look at their facial expressions. Also, talk with their teachers. Then ask yourself, does what this bill offer mesh with what is most needed by our teachers and students?

Finally, I found that the proposed amendment to the definition of basic education to be very consistent with the flawed thinking that has caused us to get into the mess we are currently in, because again we are inserting accountability language before we ensure that the definition of basic education is written so that the goals of education reform can be funded. The proposal is to expand the goal of the Basic Education Act for public schools to include "the development of a public school system that focuses more on the educational performance of students and includes high expectations for all students". What PTA and others have been arguing over and over is that we need a new definition of basic education which updates the components of basic education based on the current expectations set forth in education reform. How does this translate more specifically? All day kindergarten and technology are examples of components that could be added to the definition of basic education. As I have indicated in my testimony, this and more is needed. We need to decide what will work, what will help us reach our vision then define those elements in Basic Ed. so that the funding can flow from the definition and so that all our kids will be adequately served to meet the challenges of today's world.

Thank you for your time and all of the effort that you put in on behalf of children.

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