

WASL Forum Informative and Thought-Provoking

Several panelists representing the business community, teachers, special education, OSPI and more, participated in a WASL forum at the WSPTA Convention on May 2nd, 2008. A key concept touched on by several of the panelists is that the controversy surrounding the WASL is distracting the discussion from the real issue, which is improving student learning to prepare them for successful lives. “Standards are the hub of the system,” said Dave Fisher, a member of the Education Committee of the Association of Washington Business. “Everything should revolve around the standards. The curriculum should help the student gain the knowledge that is embodied in those standards.”

Thelma Jackson, of the Washington Alliance of Black Educators, pointed out that prior to the WASL, too many people were being left behind. “Large cohorts of our students were not making it through the system.” Rather than blaming the students or blaming the tests, she suggested we need to first think about how we can better align the curriculum to teach the students what they need to learn.

Another common theme that several panelists commented on was the lack of resources available to local schools to help students meet the standards. One of the main reasons for the assessment is to make program evaluations. “We have been unable due to lack of resources to provide diagnostic tools to teachers,” said Joe Willhoft, Assistant Superintendent of Assessment, OSPI.

Several panelists acknowledged that the financial impact of the WASL goes beyond the printing, postage and storage of tests, but impacts students as well. “There is a psychological impact on students,” said Lester Krupp, an English Teacher at Yelm High School. He shared a story of a student who was actually contemplating suicide due to the stress he was experiencing at school.

In addition to the financial and emotional impacts of the WASL, there is also an opportunity cost to consider--the time spent on testing and test preparation cannot be used to be engaged in other activities. “I believe the WASL has limited what we are able to do around the standards,” said Maureen Ramos, Washington Education Association.

Thelma Jackson offered another perspective on the financial impact of the WASL. “With students exiting schools ill-prepared, and the importation of jobs and people, the overall economic impact of our state needs to be addressed in this discussion as well. We are assessing the quality of our whole educational system,” she said.

Another panelist agreed that while the WASL has a financial impact, it is a necessary one. “Assessment is a modest investment in our schools, and a necessary investment. It gives us an opportunity for us to be smarter in investing the resources we do have in our schools,” said Dave Fisher.

In the future, some panelists suggested it would be helpful for the WASLs to provide scores more quickly, with more diagnostic tools, and more benchmarks throughout the

year. “We need information that provides teachers with information on the achievement gap, and the WASL is currently no doing that very well,” said Pat Steinburg, President of the Special Education Coalition.