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Thursday, September 2, 2004

More parents to get school-choice option 40 facilities in the state failed to meet all federal testing standards

By GREGORY ROBERTS
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

BURIEN -- Although scores rose this year on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning, the results mean parents at more public schools than ever before will be offered the chance to transfer their children to a better-performing school at district expense.

The results announced yesterday would be considerably dimmer if state officials hadn't changed the scoring system for the test, administered each spring in elementary, middle and high schools.

That school-choice option comes from the federal No Child Left Behind law, the sweeping education reform signed by President Bush in 2002 that increased aid to education while holding schools and districts more accountable for student improvement -- as measured, in Washington, by the WASL.

Schools that receive federal aid for disadvantaged students and that consistently fall short of the goals set under No Child Left Behind are subject to increasingly severe penalties, beginning with the bailout provision offered parents after two straight years of shortfalls in either one of the two subjects currently covered by the law: math and reading.



In the Seattle area, parents at nine schools will be offered the transfer option for the first time in 2004-05, joining three other area schools already subject to the remedy from their identification as struggling schools under an earlier, less-far-reaching federal law.

Statewide, 40 federally aided schools were pushed into the "choice" category, joining 37 included under the earlier law. Statewide, 326 Washington schools did not clear the federal bar, down from 432 in 2003. A total of 1,530 schools met the standard.

In some districts with "failing" schools, administrators are fretting over how to satisfy federal requirements.

Renton School District officials are warning parents that pulling children

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out of under-achieving Dimmitt Middle School could result in a long bus trip -- to a crowded school.

"We're not trying to discourage parents from transferring, but we do want to make it clear to them that that might mean we set up classrooms in the cafeteria and so on," said district spokesman Randy Matheson. "Whatever we can do to accommodate them, by law, we have to try."

The list of schools in the federal doghouse likely would be much longer had state officials not lowered the minimum scores students need to meet standards in math and reading on the WASL in grades four and seven.

That list also was kept shorter by another adjustment, which delayed raising the threshold for success under No Child Left Behind as the state moves toward the law's goal that all students meet WASL standards by 2014.

"The bottom line is that we have consistent gains across the board," state Superintendent of Public Instruction Terry Bergeson said yesterday in announcing the 2004 results.

Bergeson singled out improvements by minority students who outstripped their white peers in terms of the increase in the percentage meeting standards: by Hispanic students in reading and writing in grades four, seven and 10 and in math in grade four, and by black students in reading in those three grades and in writing in grade 10.

"The work we've done over the past decade, it's working," she said.

But in other areas, the "achievement gap" -- the ethnic disparity between higher- and lower-performing students -- widened, as white students jumped further ahead of black and Hispanic students.

Bergeson worked on developing the learning standards measured by the WASL after the Legislature passed a landmark school reform bill in 1993. The first mandatory WASLs were given to fourth-graders in 1997, the year Bergeson took office as state superintendent, and she remains closely identified with the reform movement as she seeks election to a third four-year term this year.

Some of her opponents say the scoring changes put into effect by staff members of Bergeson's agency may be designed to burnish her record.

"We're suspicious that they may have been adjusted for political purposes," said Charles Hasse, president of the Washington Education Association, the state teachers union.

The WEA, which argues that it's wrong to put so much emphasis on a single test like the WASL, has endorsed one of Bergeson's challengers, former state Superintendent Judith Billings.

Billings took issue with Bergeson's celebration of rising scores and progress on the achievement gap, given the adjustments made and the inconsistent results.

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"To make overarching generalities about what happened is really misleading," Billings said.

Another challenger to Bergeson, Juanita Doyon, founder of Mothers Against WASL, said: "You really can't put stock in this year's scores as compared to last year's because we have lowered the standards."

Bergeson said the learning standards remain unchanged: Adjusting the passing scores, she said, was simply "fine-tuning" the system so the test more accurately reflected student achievement. And since 1997, she said, student performance on the WASL has improved impressively across the board.

Schools simply need more money to meet the standards, Bergeson said.

"We will leave children behind if we don't get additional resources. We are doing this on the backs of teachers and principals and students and parents," she said. "We don't want to lose the goal, but we've got to invest."

In Seattle, the state's largest school district, the percentage of students meeting the WASL standards went up in all three tested grades in reading, writing and math except in writing in grade four.

"We are pleased with the results," district Superintendent Raj Manhas said. "We still need to do a lot of work as we move forward, but it is really wonderful to see some individual schools, some of our challenging schools, doing really well."

Three Seattle schools that were on the earlier federal sanctions list -- Concord and T.T. Minor Elementary and Madrona K-8 school -- apparently have moved off it based on their improving WASL scores, Seattle administrators said. A fourth -- the middle-school program at the African American Academy -- fell just short of meeting federal standards this year. In general, a school can get off the list by hitting the mark two years in a row.

"That's not an issue for me," T.T. Minor Principal Gloria Mitchell said. "My issue is, are we training teachers well, to improve students' performance? Every day, not just on the WASL?"

But two Seattle elementary schools -- Rainier View and Whitworth -- came up short for the second consecutive year and must offer parents the option of transferring their students to a school that passed muster, which the district can select. Bus rides will be provided free by the district.

T.T. Minor has been supported for several years by large contributions from a private foundation, which has paid for extending the school year and other enhancements. Bergeson said that illustrates the importance of financial resources in improving achievement, and she called on the Legislature to increase spending on schools.

"We cannot have policy coming out of our mouth and not pony up," she said. "We have to pay the piper."

The state reform program includes a sanction of its own for future students who fail to meet standards on the 10th-grade WASL: They will not graduate from high school. Ninth-graders in 2004-05 make up the first class that will be held to that requirement. In 2004, only 38.8 percent of 10th-graders met standards on all three subjects of the WASL.

The Legislature last year authorized students to take the 10th-grade WASL up to five times in an effort to pass it, and it directed Bergeson's agency to develop alternate, but no less rigorous, means of assessing some students who are baffled by the WASL.

In addition, a different state agency will decide this fall whether to lower the passing grade for the test.

WASL TRENDS STATEWIDE

The numbers are up, but much of the gain comes from a lowered passing score.

	2004 Students meeting standard	CHANGE In percentage points from 2003	CHANGE From 2003 according to old standards*		2004 Percent meeting standard	CHANGE In percentage points from 2003
4TH GRADE				8TH GRADE		
MATH	59.9%	4.7	2	SCIENCE*	39.4%	N/A
READING	74.4%	7.7	0.6			
WRITING	55.8%	2.2	--	10TH GRADE		
7TH GRADE				MATH	43.9%	4.5
MATH	46.3%	9.5	1.8	READING	64.4%	4.4
READING	60.4%	12.5	3.6	WRITING	65.2%	4.7
WRITING	58.0%	3.3	--	SCIENCE*	32.2%	N/A

*Mandatory for first time in 2004.

* State officials this year lowered the score students need to meet standards on the 4th and 7th grade WASL tests in math and reading. "Old standards" reflect the percentages that would have met standards without the change.

Source: State Superintendent of Public Instruction

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