

# Basic Education Finance Joint Task Force

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## Basic Education Finance Joint Task Force

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## M E M O R A N D U M

DATE: March 2, 2008  
TO: Members, Task Force  
FROM: Dan Grimm  
SUBJECT: March 24/25 Meeting--WASL Questions and Answers

Attached is a list of potential WASL questions for our March 24/25 meeting that were distributed last week. The goal is to identify issues of the greatest interest to members and allow staff time to conduct research and prepare options.

Also attached is a list of the same questions with my *preliminary* answers, offered as a catalyst for discussion and a model of what I suggest will make for the most efficient use of our limited meeting time. I encourage each member to give a direct "yes" or "no" answer to each question—supported by a brief explanation if necessary. Everyone will be given an opportunity to respond to each question in turn. Written responses distributed prior to the meeting would be even better.

Please keep in mind that no one is required to answer any specific question and all answers will be *preliminary*. Everyone will be able to revise or reverse their positions based on subsequent findings and discussion. Further consideration of any specific issue will not be precluded by any preliminary decision.

Feel free to pose additional questions, preferably in writing, prior to the meeting. I will distribute revised lists of other questions and my preliminary answers in the next week or so.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

## WASL Questions

1. **Should the state assume any responsibility for guaranteeing that students will achieve any specific standard of academic performance?**
2. **Should the state maintain the policy of requiring students to pass a standardized test to earn a high school Certificate of Academic Achievement?**
3. **Should the state maintain the WASL as the standardized test of student achievement?**
4. **Should the state award a single high school diploma (other than the Certificate of Individual Achievement) given only to students who pass a standardized test?**
5. **Should the state expand and formalize a program of instructional support for students in jeopardy of failing the WASL or similar test?**

# WASL

## Questions & Preliminary Answers by Dan Grimm

March 2, 2008

1. **Should the state assume any responsibility for guaranteeing that students will achieve any specific standard of academic performance?**

**No.** The state is responsible for guaranteeing educational opportunities but should not explicitly or implicitly guarantee any specific outcome for any student. Student performance is the responsibility of students and their families.

2. **Should the state maintain the policy of requiring students to pass a standardized test to earn a high school Certificate of Academic Achievement?**

**Yes.** A standardized test of sufficient rigor is an incentive for many students to improve performance and for instructional staff to focus on core subjects and learning goals.

3. **Should the state maintain the WASL as the standardized test of student achievement?**

**No.** The state should use a nationally standardized test to assess the same basic skills and knowledge as the WASL, augmented if necessary to assess basic skills and knowledge unique to Washington State.

4. **Should the state award a single high school diploma (other than the Certificate of Individual Achievement) given only to students who pass a standardized test?**

**No.** The WASL has improved student performance for many students but has been of little or no benefit to many others. It has not reduced the dropout rate and there is no evidence the addition of math and science graduation tests will improve the situation.

A single diploma has resulted in the proliferation of alternatives that allow students to earn a WASL certificate without passing the WASL test, a trend that will diminish the value of the certificate to students who pass the test.

The benefit of encouraging all students to stay in school by offering additional diplomas is greater than the unproven benefit of motivating some students to pass the WASL by threatening them with ultimate failure if they don't.

How many diplomas should the state award? At least four, including but not limited to:

- a) A ***Certificate of Individual Achievement*** for eligible special education students.

- b) A ***Certificate of Academic Achievement*** for students who pass a standardized graduation test. Alternative demonstrations of academic achievement should be awarded alternative diplomas.
- c) A ***Certificate of Career and Technical Education*** for students who complete a course of instruction that will develop skills and enhance their ability to enter the job market immediately after graduation; and
- d) A ***Certificate of Academic Excellence*** for students who demonstrate exceptional standardized test performance and excel in demanding classes. An excellence diploma would be an incentive for students to pursue their full potential and likely would be recognized by colleges and universities as an indication of probable undergraduate success.

The diplomas would not be mutually exclusive. A student could earn every diploma and it is likely many students would earn more than one.

**5. Should the state expand and formalize a program of instructional support for students in jeopardy of failing the WASL or similar test?**

**Yes.** Despite initial indications, many struggling students have not taken advantage of programs specifically designed to help them pass the WASL test; the state has an obligation to provide every student with the opportunity. The programs should be funded separately and require rigorous recordkeeping, reporting, and program evaluation.