

September 2001

**Educational Opportunities in Washington's
High Schools Under State Education Reform:
Case Studies of Eight Washington High Schools
VOLUME 3**

INTRODUCTION

Background

The 2000 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to conduct a study on public high school programs in Washington:

The study shall examine what high school educational opportunities are currently available for students. Information shall be gathered on program attributes, student demographics, and outcomes for high school programs including, but not limited to, college credit (e.g., advanced placement and running start), tech prep, distance learning, and career pathways.¹

Volume 2 of the Institute's report, *Educational Opportunities in Washington's High Schools Under State Education Reform* analyzed responses to a statewide survey of public high schools and incorporated information from eight case studies of high schools across the state. This volume contains summaries of interviews with 18 administrators, 185 teachers and staff, 210 students, and 60 parents and community members at the eight case study schools.

Case Study Selection

Schools were selected based on the following criteria (see Table 1):

- **Size of School:** Two small schools (250 to 900 students), four medium schools (900 to 1,500 students), and two large schools (over 1,500 students);
- **Geography:** A balance of the west, central, and east sides of the state, as well as rural, suburban, and urban locations;
- **Demographics:** Schools with at least 15 percent of the student population eligible for free and reduced lunch and at least 9 percent minority enrollment;
- **Grade Levels:** Schools with a 9th through 12th grade configuration, to maintain consistency in the types of issues discussed; and

¹ Chapter 1, Laws of 2000 (EHB 2487 §607(4)).

- **Other Considerations:** Several schools identified as pursuing standards-based reform efforts.

Table 1
Case Study High Schools

HIGH SCHOOL (DISTRICT)	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	SCHOOL SIZE	LOCATION	PERCENT FREE AND REDUCED LUNCH	PERCENT MINORITY
PASCO	2,285	Large	Central	43%	62%
MOSES LAKE	1,742	Large	East	26%	26%
SUNNYSIDE	1,368	Med/Large	Central	39%	69%
MARK MORRIS (LONGVIEW)	1,147	Medium	Southwest	16%	9%
NATHAN HALE (SEATTLE)	1,089	Medium	West	27%	39%
SEQUIM	935	Med/Small	West	18%	12%
NOOKSACK VALLEY	519	Small	Northwest	29%	17%
LAKE ROOSEVELT (GRAND COULEE DAM)	299	Small	East	25%	53%

Common Themes

Participants in the case studies were asked questions pertaining to the following topics:

- **Strategies to Improve Student Learning**

Questions included the top priority for the school in improving student learning and changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment as a result of the state’s education reform.

- **Impact of the Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) and the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL)**

In addition to questions about how curriculum and assessment practices have been affected by the EALRs and WASL, participants were asked how schools are addressing students who may have difficulty meeting the state’s standards. The opinions of students and parents were solicited about the WASL as a future high school graduation requirement.

- **Options and Strategies to Make Learning More Relevant for Students**

Participants were asked about their high school's experience in using the following strategies to make learning more relevant for students:

- *Career Pathways* where students are encouraged to explore educational and career options using a career theme.
- *Culminating Projects* and *Portfolios* for students to display work and accomplishments to reflect their high school education and educational and career aspirations.
- *Education Plan* to assist students with planning for their options after high school.
- *Mentor Program* where teachers are assigned a small group of students to advise and mentor throughout their high school years.
- *Service Learning* opportunities for students to combine community involvement with their studies.

- **Challenges and Opportunities for the Future**

Despite the geographic and demographic variation among the eight high schools, a number of themes were remarkably similar among case study participants. Because the information comes from only eight schools, it does not represent all public high schools in Washington. However, the themes are generally consistent with the findings from the Institute's survey of public high schools. (See Table 2 and the summaries that follow.)

Table 2
Common Themes Identified in Case Studies

TOPIC	THEME
STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes are being made in curriculum to align with the EALRs and ensure students cover essential material in time for the 10th grade WASL. • Changes are being made in instruction and assessment to prepare students for the WASL.
IMPACT OF EALRS AND WASL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State standards have broad support, but most participants expressed concerns about the WASL. • Remediation options for students who will have difficulty passing the WASL are being explored, but few major changes have been implemented to date. • Because the WASL is not yet a requirement for graduation, there are few incentives for students to take the test seriously.
OPTIONS AND STRATEGIES TO MAKE LEARNING MORE RELEVANT FOR STUDENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools are experimenting with culminating projects and portfolios, but it takes resources, planning, and effort to integrate these activities into the curriculum and make them meaningful for students. • Career pathways can be valuable for students when career themes and post high-school planning are integrated into students' overall education. However, the use of career pathways varies widely and not everyone agrees high schools should emphasize career or educational planning outside the counseling office.
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparing students for the WASL and remediation for students who have difficulty meeting the standards is a looming concern. • Some traditional assumptions about a high school education are still widely held: "The best high school is one that provides a little something for everyone," and "Students deserve to relax during their senior year."

Document Number: 01-09-2202