WRESTLING WITH STATE GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

A cap and gown or a WASL letdown?

Brittany Mouton, right, waits for an English class at Clark College. Even while taking Running Start courses, she must complete an extra year of high-school math to earn her Evergreen High School diploma on time. Hundreds of Clark County 12th-graders face similar WASL-related challenges.

ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

W e kept meeting these kids who told us they might not graduate.

We would be talking about something else — school lunch, art, the pirates exhibit at the county fair — and it would come out: “I’m so screwed. I didn’t pass the reading WASL.”

Last year’s seniors had to complete 20-some yearlong classes to graduate. But the Class of 2008 must prove math, reading and writing skills. About 1,300 seniors countywide need to pass a test, take a class or submit a portfolio to graduate in spring.

We’ve documented this, pepperering our readers with numbers and variations in percentage points. We’ve written dry-as-toast policy pieces, quoting administrators, lawmakers and school officials.

So we’re trying something different: telling the story of the WASL through the eyes of the Class of 2008.

Our education team put in calls to exhausted counselors and assistant principals, begging, pleading, just short of bribing, to speak with students at risk of not graduating. (Thanks to Linda McGeachy, Jeff Snell and Mike Lane at Vancouver Public Schools and Rashonda Waters at Evergreen Public Schools.)

Class of 2008

Does graduation this year rest on passing the WASL? Not exactly. Requirements:

* 19 or more high school credits.
* Senior project.
* High school and beyond plan* started in middle school, meant to help students better chart their high school years.

Plus either:

* Pass reading and writing portions of the WASL, and
* Pass math portion of the WASL, or take a full year of math and attempt the math WASL a second time.

Or:

* Score high on an Advanced Placement, PSAT, SAT or ACT exam.

Or:

* Maintain a high grade point average.

Or:

* Submit a portfolio of work samples.

School districts, not the state, monitor these requirements.

The Columbian

Stories by ISOLDE RAPTERY and HOWARD BUCK
Graduation: Meet four high school seniors with WASL worries

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We met seniors who were confused by the graduation rules that are constantly being tweaked and changed. "We like guinea pigs," Callie Kinney, a senior at Columbia River High, said she believes her class is misunderstood. "Outsiders see us and say, 'If they really want to do it, they'll graduate,'" Amanda said. "But they don't see the whole story."
They're tracking four students to graduation day. Callie, 16, is a nose-in-the-grass kind of girl. Amanda, 17, is set on locking down her diploma before she has her first child. Broc, Bashe, 17, is a Fort Vancouver High School student who wants to become a professional motocross rider. And Brittany, Madison, 18, at Evergreen High, dreams of being a Horton Air Flight attendant.

Amanda
'It's almost overwhelming sometimes'

It wasn't supposed to be this way for Amanda Jeannald, 17, at Evergreen Senior High, the few high school seniors whose academic future is more than a grade, more than a chance to skip a grade. But she declined. So far, she's not behind of himself, the Evergreen Senior High, 17, she'd graduate with.

She would have been much closer to finish her math. Now, she must complete her senior project, pass her state- required math review class and then the state exam in order to graduate.

All before May 16, the due date for her baby girl. It's just a stressful. I just want to go college and follow out my dreams," she said. "I can't help any day care, her mother and support, and I just want to be at home."
Complications after getting her diploma, and something Amanda sticks in her home during her sophomore math WASL. Continues over refrigerating for a second try, a reframe on what she's been able to do, and a current senior project.

EVEN MORE
CELEBRATION
FOR EVERGREEN
Senior Fort Vancouver High School senior Broc Barnes, with his father, Brian Barnes, is a skilled motocross rider but less sure of his math abilities. To graduate this spring, he must pass a math review course.

"I'm not that good at math. The tests get to me."

He passed the writing WASL, his sophomore year and the reading WASL his junior year. But the math WASL has stumped him twice. He's taking the state-required math review course to graduate. "It's life isn't been easy tough."
His parents still 12 years ages.
Seven years ago, his father stopped using crack cocaine.
Because of the hectic weekends, Brian Barnes ended up raising his children. He blames himself for his bad habits.
"I don't believe I made a mistake not pushing him enough," Brian Barnes said. "I agree with his dad, a point."
"I like to push him," Broc said. "But I would have pushed me, I probably would have pushed it."
This school year, father and son have focused on school and graduation. At a meeting in December for parents of students who didn't graduate, Brian Barnes was one of two parents who showed up.
"I believe that he graduated," Brian Barnes said. "I believe that he graduated." And that's why he is graduating this spring.

Looking beyond junior year, Broc hopes to become a professional rider. "I'd like to get a job and work," he said. "I'd like to have a job and work."
More than ever, WASL is source of contention

Senate mulls bill delaying reading, writing demands

By ISOLDE RAFTERY
Columbian staff writer

The Class of 2008 was in diapers when Washington state educators jumped on the standards-based bandwagon.

Business owners had grumbled that high school graduates were ill-prepared for work. High-level educators dreamed of world-class standards — buzzwords that live on today. They wanted locally grown engineers to fill chairs at Microsoft and scientists to fill endowed chairs at the universities.

That was 1993. The Washington Assessment of Student Learning, or WASL (pronounced “wassle”), was a modern exam written by teachers who worked in Washington schools. The exam asks students to write out how they arrive at answers, not just to fill in the blanks of a multiple choice test.

In 2000, those seniors learned they have to pass the WASL to graduate. Two years later, the exam became even more relevant with passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The law demands that all students meet a state-set standard by 2014.

Parents and teachers union members raged. The exam is one-size-fits-all. It wasn’t meant to measure students and unfairly punishes schools with high numbers of low income and immigrant kids.

Moreover, they said, students in special education feel ridiculed. Anyone who has watched special education students struggle through the exam will tell you that it’s heartbreaking and frustrating.

WASL critics have called the exam racist. WASL advocates argued that it is racist to blame a student’s poor score on poverty or skin color. We shouldn’t hide the achievement gap, they said.

Last year, the state Legislature delayed the requirement for passing math to 2013. As it stands, 85 percent of Washington state seniors have passed the reading and writing WASL. In Clark County, about 1,300 students must prove their skills to graduate.

When we began reporting for this series, it appeared diploma requirements wouldn’t budge further. But they just might during this legislative session: The state Senate is considering a bill that would delay the reading and writing requirements for graduation, to 2012.

WASL supporters say the bill would effectively gut the exam.

That debate aside, local educators agree the federal government should pay more for desired changes:

Many are waiting for reforms under the next U.S. president. They hope for mercy, particularly for students with disabilities and those who don’t speak English.

If the next leader supports the current law as is, don’t expect educators to back down. Expect a passionate fight.

HOWARD BUCK contributed to this story.

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