

A cap and gown or a WASL letdown?



ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

Brittany Moulton, 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.

We 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.”

Put to the test

AN OCCASIONAL SERIES

■ We follow local high school seniors as they struggle with WASL graduation requirements.

INSIDE

Profiles of the four students. **Page A6**
How the WASL has changed since its inception in 1993. **Page A7**

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, peppering 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.)

GRADUATION, Page A6

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:

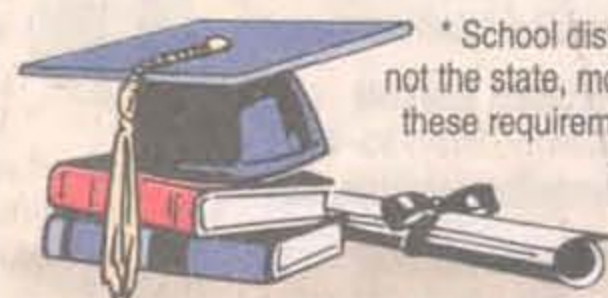
- Score high on an Advanced Placement, PSAT, SAT or ACT exam.

Or:

- Maintain a high grade point average.

Or:

- Submit a portfolio of work samples.



* School districts, not the state, monitor these requirements.

The Columbian

Graduation: Meet four high school seniors with WASL worries

From Page A1

We met seniors who were confused by the graduation rules that are continuously tweaked and changed. "We're like guinea pigs," Callie Kimsey, a senior at

Columbia River High, said. Amanda JeanBlanc, a senior at Evergreen High School, 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 work." We're tracking four students to graduation day. Callie, 18, is a nose-to-the-grindstone kind of girl. Amanda, 17, is set on locking down her diploma before she has her

first child. Broc Barnes, 17, is a Fort Vancouver High School student who wants to become a professional motocross rider. And Brittany Moulton, 18, at Evergreen High, dreams of being a Horizon Air flight attendant.

They don't gripe about the WASL itself. Though they were relieved when the state legislature delayed the math WASL requirement for graduation last year, they do believe there should be graduation standards.

At a parent meeting in December, Broc Barnes' father, Brian Barnes, said he didn't want his son to slide through high school. "I'm a blue-collar worker, a single dad," he said. "I can't pay for a private education."

Amanda

'It's almost overwhelming sometimes'

It wasn't supposed to be like this for Amanda JeanBlanc.

By the fifth grade, writing talent landed her in a special Portland State University work-shop. She was offered more, including a chance to skip a grade. But she declined.

"I think I was scared to get ahead of myself," the Evergreen High senior, 17, said. It would have been much easier to finish last year. Now, she must complete her

senior project, pass her state-required math review class and tie up other loose ends in order to graduate.

All before May 14, the due date for her baby girl. "It's kind of stressful. I still want to go to college and follow my plans," she said. Clark College has day care, her mother and the child's father provide support, and some Internet courses will help, she said.

Complications after getting her wisdom teeth pulled left Amanda sick at home during her sophomore math WASL. Confusion over registering

for a second try, or a refresher course, put her on the path to her current senior predicament.

Her school counselor flubbed one deadline, but Amanda shoulders the blame. "I was one of those kids who really didn't care, before I got my head on straight," she said. It's a lesson she now drives at her cousin, Judd, an Evergreen sophomore, so his senior year won't suffer, too.

"I try to really beat it into his head: You've got to focus. Don't think you can just put it all off, because it doesn't work



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian
Amanda JeanBlanc, 17, is taking an extra year of math at Evergreen High School to receive her diploma this spring.

that way," she said. It's the same thing in her math review class. She's among the few students who

show effort, she said: Good instruction and help is there, but "it's an easy class to slack off in. You have to be self-motivated."

Amanda is determined to pursue law enforcement studies, to work with juvenile offenders. She reveres her grandfather, a former sheriff's deputy.

Her biggest hurdle now is passing math and nailing her senior project. "With me, it was the geometry that was really tough, all the equations," she said. Now, she's close to working the angles to make a nice success story.

It will require grit she doesn't see in some classmates, she said with some sympathy.

"It's almost overwhelming sometimes. It's so much pressure," Amanda said. "A lot of people are complaining and whining about everything you've got to do. But I think you've just got to suck it up and do the work."

—Howard Buck

Callie



ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

Callie Kimsey, a senior at Columbia River High School, has an A in her math review course. The math class is required for students who haven't passed the math portion of the WASL.

'She has a different learning style'

A stuffed canvas bag holds Callie Kimsey's education history: a Mother's Day card, sympathetic teachers' notes, writing tests with labored handwriting and bad spelling.

"Touu," for tuna. "Bekus," for because.

In first grade, Callie, now a senior at Columbia River High School, was diagnosed with dyslexia, which affects how Callie processes written information.

Over the next 12 years, her mother, Debbie Kimsey, fought for her daughter — testimonials at school board meetings, letters to administrators — determined to see her graduate.

So when Kimsey heard that her daughter would have to pass the WASL, she worried those efforts would become meaningless. Could a single exam wipe out her daughter's exhausting struggles through school? "She has a different learning style, so I knew it would be trouble for her," Kimsey said.

Callie is petite and unassuming, a thoughtful young woman who works at the Indoor Soccer Arena almost every day, coaching the Little Kickers program. She's a no-frills teen — jeans, sweatshirt, ponytail on most days — who doesn't have time for social climbing.

She passed the writing section of the WASL her sophomore year, the reading section her junior year. Math remains the challenge.

Callie was relieved when the state

Legislature delayed the math requirement to 2013. But she didn't mind when legislators said later that students who failed the math WASL had to take an additional math class and attempt the exam one last time to graduate. Callie is sailing through the refresher course with an A.

Debbie Kimsey continues to ask school officials about the significance of Callie's diploma, if she does pass the class. Could her daughter snag that coveted Credential of Academic Achievement that indicates those students who have passed all sections of the WASL?

Educators differ in their answers, in large part because the rules keep changing. Callie's graduation requirements are up in the air again as legislators meet in Olympia.

"We feel like guinea pigs," Callie said. She's one of 8,000 Washington students taking the math review course.

Next year, she wants to attend Clark College.

"I don't want to waste money. Everybody's going off to college, and they don't know what they want to do," she said.

Her mom has suggested working for the family business, but Callie isn't so sure. She's not stressed about the future — not about work or whether she'll graduate. Sweet-tempered Callie leaves the worrying to her mother.

"You were pushy," she teased her mother on a recent afternoon.

"I was pushy," Debbie Kimsey agreed. "But it was good for you."

—Isolde Raftery

Broc



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian
Fort Vancouver High School senior Broc Barnes, here 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.'

Broc Barnes started motorcycle riding at 4. His dad hung on two times before he first roared off on a PW50 Yamaha, instantly taken by a sport that has consumed his family.

His uncle was a professional motocross rider in the 1980s. His father, Brian Barnes, is the gravelly voice that announces the AMA Championship at Washougal Motocross Park. His sister, Brianna, 19, has traveled the West Coast with her father and brother almost every weekend since it all began.

Broc, 17, is a confident rider, one notch below professional. Watching his tall, lean body push his bike into the air so effortlessly, barely kicking up dirt from the track, can take your breath away.

But in the classroom, Broc is less sure of himself. "I'm not that good at math," he said. "The tests get to me.

It's a mental thing."

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.

Broc's life hasn't been easy terrain.

His parents split 12 years ago. 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 addiction and for the weekends Broc spent at motocross instead of at home doing homework.

"I don't know if I made a mistake not pushing him enough," Brian Barnes said.

Broc agrees with his dad, to a point.

"I don't like to be pushed," Broc said. "But if he would have pushed

me, I probably would have passed."

This school year, father and son have focused on school and graduation.

At a meeting in December for parents of students who risked not graduating, Brian Barnes was one of two parents who showed up. Staff at Fort Vancouver High School had called 60 to 70 families.

Sitting in the front row, Brian Barnes said, "This could dictate what happens for the rest of his life. ... He's an incredibly bright kid — he has good attendance and attitude — but he's had problems with some basic things."

With a high B in the math review class, Broc isn't worried about graduating this spring.

Looking beyond June, Broc hopes to become a professional rider. Or, he'll attend Clark College.

"I'd get a job and work," he said. "And if I have time, I'll ride."

—Isolde Raftery

Brittany

'We were kind of looked at as guinea pigs, I guess'

Brittany Moulton badly wants to follow her grandmother's high-flying career and work for Horizon Air.

But failure to pass the math WASL and tough new graduation rules have clipped her wings, for now.

She would gladly load up on a full schedule of Running Start courses at Clark College to get ahead. Instead, days are split between Clark and a state-required math review class at Evergreen High School, plus work on a stress-inducing, culminating senior project.

"We were kind of looked at as guinea pigs, I guess," said the 18-year-old. "Everybody thinks of us as, 'Oh, Class of 2008? That sucks for you.'"

Brittany fell just two points shy on the 10th-grade WASL math test, while she easily passed reading and writing. Her counselors thought she would pass her second try at math with little difficulty and didn't push a math prep course.

They were wrong: This time, in her junior year, she missed by 10 points. "It's just stuff I forget because we haven't gone over it," she said.

Now comes an extra year of

comprehensive math review. Her teacher is good, but most students barely try, she said. They mostly gossip and send text messages to friends, she said. "Not to be rude, but ... it kind of seems like a special ed class."

Brittany said she constantly asks questions and takes advantage of her teacher's earnest effort. "It's for us. The school's doing this for our benefit. I want to get it right," she said. She earns A's and B's in other subjects, and the math is now going well, she said.

Yet she believes Evergreen was not ready to lead seniors



ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian
Evergreen senior Brittany Moulton, 18, hopes to become a Horizon Air flight attendant, following her grandmother's path.

through new 2008 hurdles.

There should have been a review course before the sophomore WASL, she said. As juniors, her class should have been allowed more review

options and to start senior projects early, now both allowed, instead of being under the gun this year.

"All of it at once is just a lot. I think our school was very

unprepared. They've known about it," she said. It didn't help that Evergreen seniors bore the brunt of a two-year school remodeling project.

Even so, Brittany isn't caught up in self-pity. She now understands that high school is a time of personal responsibility, when students must take charge of schedules and hard work, and focus.

"Teachers aren't going to hold your hand," she said. She's tried to drum the message into her brother, Tyler, an Evergreen junior who failed all three WASL portions. He's already taken a math review course and will move on to an English review class.

She's confident about graduation, if she can handle the short-term squeeze. And then, trying to latch on to Horizon.

—Howard Buck



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.

ISOLDE RAFTERY can be reached at 360-735-4546 or isolde.raftery@columbian.com.