The Washington State Board of Education
Governance I Achievement I High School and College Preparation I Math & Science I Effective Workforce

Old Capitol Building, Room 253
P.O. Box 47206
600 Washington St. SE
Olympia, Washington 98504

Legislators in Olympia are considering a bill that would eliminate the requirement to pass a writing proficiency test for high school graduation.

The writing component is just one part of a legislative proposal, Substitute House Bill 2538, to reduce a variety of school district requirements.

Given the fiscal challenges facing districts, now is the right time to think about providing flexibility, and eliminating needless requirements. But it is not the right time to fundamentally redefine what a meaningful high school diploma requires.

To be career and college-ready, high school graduates will need to know how to write. In an increasingly digital world, the ability to earn a living and contribute to a democratic society relies on fully developed writing skills.

Because the federal No Child Left Behind law doesn't require writing assessments, legislators tend to view them as viable cost-cutting options. But what federal law does or doesn't require should not drive what a meaningful high school diploma in Washington should be. Policymakers, employers, and concerned citizens in this state have been clear: high school graduates need to be able to write effectively to be successful citizens.

In fact, the Legislature has designated four basic education learning goals in law (RCW 28A.150.210) that outline bedrock minimum expectations for all of our students. The ability to "write effectively" is a cornerstone of the very first basic education goal. If it's a goal we are serious about, shouldn't we continue to measure our progress toward it?

Research by the Rand Corporation and others indicates that standards-based reform can move the dial on student performance. If we set high standards and measure our progress towards them, students will respond. The standards we set, and how we test them, guide instructional practice in meaningful ways.

As part of a longstanding commitment to standards-based reform, Washington has administered assessments in writing, math, and reading since 1997. Prior to 2006, writing assessment scores were disappointing; no more than 66 percent of sophomores earned a passing score on their first attempt. In 2006, however, scores increased to 80 percent passing on the first attempt.

Why the jump?

The increased scores likely reflect a variety of factors, but it's unmistakable that scores jumped when the statewide writing assessment became a graduation requirement for the class of 2008. If we take writing seriously, so will students.

Unfortunately, HB 2538 removes that imperative, making it plausible that our academic gains in writing over the last six years will dissipate. Ninety-four percent of the graduating class of 2011 met proficiency in writing, after all retakes and alternative options. We have made significant progress. However, this proposal would be a big step backwards, to save a small amount of money.

Jeff Vincent, *Chair* • Randy Dorn, *Superintendent of Public Instruction*
Dr. Bernal Baca • Amy Bragdon • Kevin Laverty • Dr. Sheila Fox • Phyllis Bunker Frank • Jared Costanzo
Bob Hughes • Dr. Kristina Mayer • John C. "Jack" Schuster • Matthew Spencer • Cynthia McMullen • Mary Jean Ryan • Tre' Maxie
Ben Rarick, *Executive Director*
(360) 725-6025 • TTY (360) 664-3631 • FAX (360) 586-2357 • Email: sbe@k12.wa.us • www:sbe.wa.gov

Our future depends on graduates who can not only process information, but interact with the world around them. We want our graduates to be able write and voice concerns, to vote, to fill out applications, to write college essays, to compose letters to the editor, to draft papers required for a degree or certificate, and, in general, to have the ability to convey thoughts and ideas in a logical manner.

The proposal to eliminate the writing graduation requirement in SHB 2538 may be sold as a cost-saving measure, but I would argue that the costs are simply shifted. Though the current educational system may save some money on assessments, ultimately, there is a price to pay for weakening the rigor of a high school diploma. An education that does not adequately support and teach the value of writing could have serious implications for future graduates.

Jeff Vincent,
Chair
The Washington State Board of Education
206-464-5090