

Waivers from the Basic Education Act Requirements and System Performance Accountability

Summary

The State Board of Education (SBE) is considering a revision to its rules on waivers from the Basic Education Act requirements. SBE's Waivers Committee has produced a set of potential options and would like input from the SPA Work Group on one option. The proposed option would allow districts to request waivers under the new accountability system. SBE will consider this and other options at its November 2009 meeting.

Waivers and SPA

Currently, both SBE and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) have the authority to grant school districts waivers from the Basic Education Act requirements (RCW 28A.655.180). OSPI provides waivers to districts for short-term planning after floods or storms. SBE provides waivers to districts for long-term planning to increase student achievement.

Shifting Waivers

The proposed option would shift the long-term planning waivers over to OSPI to administer under the new accountability system. OSPI would evaluate the proposed waivers according to guidelines and rubrics to ensure that they are used for innovative purposes. For districts in Required Action, OSPI would assist the districts in determining if waivers fit into their improvement plans. For Academic Watch Districts, both OSPI and SBE would approve waivers as part of the Academic Watch Implementation.

Benefits

OSPI would have the capacity under the new accountability system to evaluate waiver proposals and effectively monitor progress towards goals. The school improvement staff within OSPI has the knowledge and the ability to provide guidance and share information about best practices. It has the resources to develop a full picture of districts' academic achievement, financial fitness and contractual obligations. The staff has access to the latest statewide data and national research.

Current Use of Waivers

Long-term planning waivers enhance the educational program for each student. They are primarily used by districts for professional development days. Washington State laws allow waivers to be granted for up to three years for the following requirements:

- Minimum one hundred eighty-day school year.
- Total instructional hour (no current waivers).
- Student-to-teacher ratio (no current waivers).

For the 2009-10 school year, there are 67 school districts with waivers from the 180 school day requirement. The average number of days is three and the average number of years is three. Most districts propose to meet the goals of their waivers by providing full days of professional

development. This kind of waiver may no longer be necessary when the state restores previously cut Learning Improvement Days.

For current waivers, the most common goals are:

- Improve student achievement and state assessment scores in mathematics and science (currently the most common goal).
- Improve student achievement and state assessment scores in reading and writing (the most common goal prior to 2008).
- Align curricula and classroom instruction to state standards.
- Close the achievement gap.
- Improve teachers' instructional skills and content knowledge.
- Increase parent involvement.

The most common strategies to accomplish the goals are:

- Professional development (most commonly used strategy).
- Alignment of curricula to standards or implementation of new curricula.
- Collaborative time across disciplines, grades, buildings, and districts.
- Professional Learning Communities.
- Analyze district-wide student achievement data and apply appropriate strategies.
- Partner with other districts to provide professional development or establish professional learning communities.

For Consideration

Feedback on the following questions will assist SBE in determining the strength of the proposed option:

1. What are the benefits to moving the waiver program into the new accountability system?
2. How could the waiver program be a useful tool in the accountability system?
3. Currently all districts may apply for waivers. Which stages of the accountability system would waivers best fit as a tool for improving student achievement?
4. How well do the most common strategies and goals of waivers fit into the design of the new accountability system?