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Wave of students to gear up for WASL

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More high school students than ever will take the Washington Assessment of Student Learning starting Tuesday, even as state lawmakers continue debate about the test's status as a graduation requirement.

At least 100,000 high school students required to pass the reading, writing and math sections to graduate under existing law will take the test in March and April. That's an all-time high partly spurred by students in the class of 2008 — the first class facing the WASL requirement — retaking sections that they failed. Also, a record number of freshmen signed up to try the test a year early.

Almost 9,600 students in the class of 2008 signed up to take a WASL test this spring. But the state has distributed enough WASL booklets to local school districts to accommodate any 11th-grader who failed one or more sections. That means the number tested could be higher, said Molly O'Connor, a spokeswoman in the state Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

In addition to this year's sophomores, about 14,000 ninth-graders voluntarily signed up to take the 10th-grade WASL, or more than double the 6,100 freshmen who took it last year. The voluntary option is intended for ninth-graders who are likely to pass, said Phil Dommes, North Thurston Public Schools' assessment director.

"It's still a 10th-grade test, but these students think they have the skills at this point," he said.

Meanwhile, a handful of WASL-related bills survived the first legislative cutoff date last month. Three call on lawmakers to delay or change the math WASL requirement, as almost half the students in the class of 2008 failed that section. A fourth bill would eliminate the WASL as a graduation requirement.

"I know I'm slightly confused," said Laura Williams, 16, a junior at Avanti High School who will retake the math WASL in April. "They're thinking about postponing the math. So what should I focus on when I'm trying to prepare myself? It's really up in the air."

O'Connor's advice: proceed under existing law.

“For all of the bills looking at a delay in math, students would still need to take the WASL and math classes,” she said. “It doesn’t change a whole lot for students because they need to take the test and keep working on their skills.”

Weather worries

People in some districts statewide are worried about how students will fare if they missed a lot of school days because of this winter’s inclement weather. In South Sound, Yelm Community Schools lost seven full days and had three late starts, for example.

That has meant that Yelm teachers have had to change their course plans to make sure students learn WASL material before test day arrives, said Lois Baker, Yelm’s executive director of curriculum.

“There is so much to cover prior to the WASL,” she said. “If it was only (missed) coursework, we could spread it out, but because of the WASL, we’re having to make adjustments.”

Still, the weather losses could affect students’ WASL performance despite the catch-up effort, Baker said.

“We do believe that there will likely be some impact, though that’s not necessarily measurable at this point,” she said.

Writing WASL

Students taking the writing WASL starting Tuesday will face three days of testing rather than the usual two. The state has required students to take three days so it can build up its bank of potential WASL test questions for future years.

“We do this every year with reading and math, and it’s just that the pilot items are embedded in the test,” O’Connor said. “The difference with writing is that it occupies a whole other day of testing.”

Timberline High School juniors in teacher Kristina Wilkinson’s U.S. history class say they’re feeling prepared to take the writing WASL. They’ve been using a Vantage Learning computer program called “MY Access” to practice their expository and persuasive-writing skills.

After students finish responding to a writing prompt, the program gives them an instant score in six areas, including content, focus and organization.

“It’s so much more feedback than I could give with 30 students in a class,” Wilkinson said. “It frees me up to be able to walk around and provide individual attention.”

The program also offers suggestions on how to improve.

“It will boost your confidence instead of saying, ‘I can’t do this,’ ” said Danny Tillmon, 17, a junior.

Divonte Fortune, 18, another junior, said help from Wilkinson and the computer program has prepared him for the WASL.

“I can think off the top of my head now and have a good essay,” he said.

New this year

There are some other changes that schools and students face with this spring’s WASL testing.

- Some students in special-education programs statewide now have fewer options.

Until this year, students in special education could take what’s called the Developmentally Appropriate WASL, or DAW. That meant those students could take a lower-grade-level WASL than peers not in special-education programs. A 10th-grader might take a seventh-grade WASL, for example.

However, the U.S. Department of Education has decided that the DAW doesn’t meet federal testing requirements, so the option is no longer available to students in third through eighth grades and 10th grade.

“It’s going to be a hurdle that we didn’t have last year because the question is, ‘Can we still have improvement?’ ” said Matt Grant, Olympia High School’s principal.

Options that remain available to special-education students include taking the WASL at the current grade level without having to earn as high a score to pass, putting together a portfolio of work samples, and seeking special accommodations when taking the test, such as additional time.

- More students’ test scores will count toward “Adequate Yearly Progress,” or AYP, a federal benchmark for which schools and districts are accountable under the No Child Left Behind Act.

The annual progress calculation is used to determine whether schools or districts must undergo improvement planning to raise their students’ level of performance.

Previously, only fourth-, seventh- and 10th-grade scores were included in the calculation. But last year, students in grades three through eight began taking reading and math tests as well. And this year, their scores will be included in the calculation, too.

“They’ll be more districts who don’t meet AYP” as a result of the change, Dommes said.

Student perspective

Black Hills High School junior Brandon Kaiser, 16, said he isn't as nervous about taking the WASL as he was as a sophomore. He already has passed the reading and writing sections but will retake the math section.

To prepare, Kaiser took a course to learn about math concepts that he got wrong the first time.

"My class has mostly been through it once," he said. "So we're not too worried about it."

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