

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

Wednesday, June 8, 2005

Washington Assessment of Student Learning Receives a Failing Grade -- from the Kids

By [JESSICA BLANCHARD](#)

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We often hear parents, educators and school administrators speaking up about the WASL -- but what do students think?

At Rainier Beach High School, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning was a hot topic this semester in Paula Scott's humanities classes.

Her students, who as ninth-graders will be required to pass the WASL in order to graduate, debated the value of the standardized tests during a unit on media literacy. Then, armed with state education department statistics, they came up with a list of questions and set out with a video camera to find answers.

Tonight [June 8, 2005], they'll premiere "What WE Think!" -- a series of public-service announcements they created.

The announcements weave together interviews with classmates, teachers, administrators and Rainier Beach graduates, and footage of other scenes, such as a mock WASL protest on campus.

Each short video is unique, but they all wound up with the same central theme: Students don't like the WASL.

Zakryan Redfeather, 15, said everyone he interviewed seemed to agree the test was an unfair addition to graduation requirements.

"No one liked it," he said. "What's the point of getting grades if you have to pass the WASL to graduate?"

Staci Robinson, 15, said she knew of at least two people who were struggling in school and dropped out because they assumed they'd fail the test.

With less than half of 10th-graders at her school passing the WASL in recent years, she and her classmates are concerned more will drop out or be denied diplomas. She hopes the PSAs will make people listen to their concerns.

"We wanted to let the public know how the class of 2008 feels," she said.

The state Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction stands by the WASL as a valuable tool that could help improve graduation rates.

"They're looking at it as a punitive approach, and we're looking at it as an opportunity to help the students," said department spokeswoman Kim Schmanke.

By using the test, "we're focusing in on kids who are struggling, and who we previously haven't served as well as we should have or could have," she said.

The public-service announcements were the final project in a semester-long media literacy unit.

Over the past few months, students examined different types of news outlets and who owns them, looked at the power of advertisements and did a number of exercises to help sharpen their critical-thinking skills, Scott said.

The results were impressive, she said. Ninth-graders who once struggled to articulate their thoughts had learned how to express themselves and defend their opinions.

"Once they realized how empowering this could be for them, they really got into it," she said. "They're taking charge of their own education."

The spots may air on a local cable-access channel at some point, said Faiza Baker-Yeboah, who helped coordinate the project through the non-profit Seattle youth group Central House and the non-partisan Eisenhower Foundation.

"There were so many moments when I was just in awe," she said. "Given the opportunity, they really produced amazing things."

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