

Focus on learning math, not on the test

Unfortunately, the education debate in Olympia these days is more about tubing the WASL (Washington Assessment of Student Learning) than about learning and teaching.

Thursday, August 28, 2008 7:42pm | OPINION

Unfortunately, the education debate in Olympia these days is more about tubing the WASL (Washington Assessment of Student Learning) than about learning and teaching.

WASL tests are given three times during a student's K-12 education and they have many opportunities for tutoring and retaking the exams. The 10th grade WASL graduation requirement for reading, writing and math was supposed to kick in this year, but two years ago the Legislature decided to delay the math requirement until 2013.

The problem is a troubling percentage of students are failing the math test. But rather than further delay or dilute the test, we should find successful math programs and use them. Our students must compete in today's demanding and rapidly changing global economy and that requires a working knowledge of math.

There are some examples of innovative learning to consider. Among them is Singapore Math which is based on the teaching methods in Singapore, whose pupils consistently rank No. 1 in international math comparisons.

In Hollywood, at Ramona Elementary, 90 percent of the students are poor and most are children of immigrants from Central America and Armenia. Nearly six in 10 students speak English as a second language.

At the start of the 2005-06 school year, Ramona began using textbooks developed for use in Singapore. Ramona's math scores soared. Principal Susan Arcaris told the Los Angeles Times. "Seven out of 10 of the students in our school are proficient or better in math and that's pretty startling when

you consider that this is an inner-city, Title 1 school.” In 2005, just 45 percent of the fifth-graders at Ramona Elementary scored at grade level on a standardized state test. In 2006, that figure rose to 76 percent.

In Maryland, Montgomery County is part of the District of Columbia metropolitan area. College Gardens Elementary was one of four schools in the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) district that tried Singapore Math. In the first four years math scores on the standardized Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills rose from the 50th and 60th percentiles to the low 90s. Unfortunately, the other three MCPS schools abandoned Singapore Math before giving it a chance to work.

John Hoven, former co-president of the Gifted and Talented Association of Montgomery County, helped persuade MCPS to try Singapore Math. Hoven says the district didn't put enough money into the new program. The initial investment was \$50,000 over two years in a \$1 billion budget — enough for text books, but not enough to train teachers how to teach the classes.

The Singapore Math is so different that lack of teacher preparation caused three of the four schools to abandon the program, says Hoven.

That is a common problem. Whether it is Singapore Math or another math program, teacher training is vital and too often, lawmakers and school districts don't put enough resources into helping teachers teach.

Then there is the matter of differential pay for math teachers. In our schools, teacher pay is tied to the same salary schedule, whether you teach physical education or geometry. Since we emphasize math, science, reading and writing, why not consider paying those teachers more?

Why not implement a master teacher program to pay teachers, particularly in math, science, reading and writing — the areas we measure on the WASL and deem necessary to succeed in life? Today, many experienced teachers leave the classroom for the front office because that is where the money is.

In other occupations, employers reward more productive workers and tie bonuses and incentives to performance. Over the years, incentive pay for teachers has been squashed and the focus has been on why it won't work, rather than what it takes to make it successful.

Between now and the time the Legislature convenes in 2009, state lawmakers should focus on effective learning programs and teacher training. They can't abandon student learning measurement, because to do so is a disservice to the next generation. But they can find ways to improve learning and lure the best and brightest teachers into the classroom and reward them for success.



© 2018, Marysville Globe and Sound Publishing, Inc.

[Subscribe](#) | [Print Editions](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [About Us](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#)