



December 22, 2014

Dear Washington State Board of Education members and staff,

On behalf of the Excellent Schools Now (ESN) Coalition, we write to express our sentiments related to setting a cut score for graduation on the high school Smarter Balanced Assessments and related issues. We strongly support the following principles:

- Students should graduate high school ready for college or career.
- We want fewer, better tests for our kids.
- The tests that students take should be meaningful with results that allow us to accurately gauge student progress against an objective measure of what is expected of students beyond high school.

Washington made the decision to better prepare students for life after high school by modernizing our state assessment system and aligning K–12 standards with postsecondary expectations. A plan was agreed to last year that allows for a multi-year transition to the use of the new assessment system for purposes of accountability and graduation requirements. Washington's plan has been held up as a model for other states. Additionally, all 34 of Washington's community and technical colleges have supported implementation of the Common Core State Standards and agreed to use the assessments developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) to determine a student's placement into postsecondary courses. The public four-year institutions have a similar agreement. Postsecondary institutions in Washington state support SBAC and are meaningfully incorporating them.

We hope the State Board of Education will continue its leadership, and move us thoughtfully, but surely, in the direction of college and career readiness for all students. We ask that the State Board hold firm to the following principles:

1. Students should graduate high school ready for college or career.

We have made great strides such as the College and Career Ready Diploma requirements, but we still have work to do. For example, the 24-credit graduation requirements brought Washington from the low end of states, in terms of high school credits required for graduation, to the middle of the pack. We have also adopted the Common Core State Standards and Next Generation Science Standards, and we revised the state achievement index. These steps are all important progress but they are necessary, not sufficient, to our goal that all students graduate prepared for success after high school.

Our expectation is that our kids should be meeting those minimum standards by the time they leave the PK–12 education system. The SBAC has recently approved cut scores for college and career readiness. They have also projected that an alarming number of students will not meet that bar initially. Washington state will likely be no different. It makes sense to transition our state from the current proficiency standard to the increased expectations of the new assessment system, but we must have an explicit

plan to get to the goal of all students who graduate meeting the college and career readiness standard.

We ask the State Board to explicitly affirm the goal of all students reaching college and career readiness and establish a detailed, thoughtful transition plan to achieve this goal.

2. We want fewer, better tests for our kids.

We don't want to see kids overtested. The tests they do take should be fair, reliable, and improve teaching and learning. Washington state has adopted the SBAC assessments. The path we are currently on limits statewide assessments to those that are required for federal accountability.

These tests will provide students and families with information about student performance when compared to peers, allow us to gather essential information on achievement or opportunity gaps, and allow for measurement of student learning growth over time.

We want policies that make the most out of fewer, better tests for our kids.

3. The tests students take should be meaningful with results that allow us to accurately gauge student progress against an objective measure of what is expected of students beyond high school.

In order to maximize the usefulness of the tests we do give, we need to be able to accurately gauge where students are in their learning. It is hard to imagine how that will happen if the tests do not have any real implication for students or adults. The suggestion by Superintendent Dorn and others to delink tests from high school graduation removes accountability for both students and adults. It also shirks our collective responsibility to educate all of our kids for 21st century learning and employment opportunities.

In the 2011–2012 school year, approximately 11,000 of 66,000 Washington high school graduates were in remediation, costing students and the state millions of dollars per year. These 11,000 students received a diploma and had to shoulder the burden of taking non-credit-bearing classes because they were not adequately prepared in the K–12 system. It is well-documented that a student's chance of postsecondary completion significantly drops with any remedial classes.

Students and their families are having to pay for what they should have gotten in high school. A diploma should mean that a student is prepared for their next step. Accepting anything less shifts a significant burden from the public education system directly onto the backs of students and their families.

We want policies that hold the K–12 education system and students in that system accountable for objective measures that are aligned to expectations for college and career readiness. The K–12 system should not get “credit” for students who are not ready for life after high school. Students and their families should not have to pay for what they should have gotten in the K–12 system.

Our state assessments have changed much over a relatively short period of time. This is complicated, difficult work. Washington has developed a model transition plan as we implement the new assessment system. During this period of transition, we applaud the State Board of Education and other policymakers for providing students several options to demonstrate proficiency. Washington state has been recognized by national experts in our thoughtful approach. We hope you will continue that thoughtful approach as you move forward.

The members of our coalition, who are parents, advocates, and community members, believe that the K–12 education system should prepare all students for college or career. Unfortunately, we are a long way from that goal. The magnitude of the challenge, however, doesn't lessen the importance of reaching the goal. Stalling or trying to water down the goal does not get us closer to adequately positioning all students for success after high school.

Thank you for your hard work and commitment to ensuring all Washington students graduate high school ready for college and career

Sincerely,

Excellent Schools Now (ESN) Steering Committee

The steering committee of Excellent Schools Now consists of: League of Education Voters, Partnership for Learning, Schools out Washington, Stand for Children Washington and Tabor 100. Excellent Schools Now (ESN) is a growing, statewide coalition of 40 organizations that believes we can and must accelerate college and career readiness and success for all young people, especially for our lowest performing and most vulnerable students populations.