

**WASHINGTON STATE K-12 EDUCATION AND LATINOS;  
AN EXAMINATION OF POLICIES AND PRACTICES**

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## WASHINGTON STATE K-12 EDUCATION AND LATINOS; An Examination of Policies and Practices

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past semester I have engaged in research related to the K-12 education system in Washington State. The research especially focuses on Latinos and the ways in which certain policies and practices specifically affect this growing demographic. Specific areas I examined were the quality of education received by Limited English Proficient Students (LEP<sup>1</sup>), various programs and methods of teaching that have proven effective or ineffective for these students, the interplay of the recently imposed Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) and actual gains in student achievement and involvement, and which of the previously stated factors might affect the achievement gap between Latinos and non-Hispanic whites and the already dismal graduation rate of Washington State's Latino students.

I sought to find what the ideal education is for Latinos and LEPs, how the current educational offerings in the state either correlate or contrast with these, and what might be done differently so as to right the course of the state's K-12 educational practices. My research was informed by scholarly literature, data from a variety of sources, and my own experiential findings through interviews, discussions, and observations of the efficacy and inefficiency of the local schools of the Walla Walla School District. Integral to my report was my Community Partner Andrea Valencia, Bilingual Kindergarten teacher at Green Park Elementary. Valencia shed great light onto the difficult place that Latinos have in society and, especially, in education, herself educated in the area and now seeking to improve the quality of education. She was able to make important synthetic connections between various areas of research as well as providing the contact information of other knowledgeable community members whose advice and counseling very much informed my project.

The main findings of my project arrived in a two-fold manner: 1) Criticisms of current educational practices, the quality of instruction, and the misappropriation of funds in light of the state's financial accountability program, and 2) Prescriptive models of ways in which Washington State's K-12 educational system and the academic experience of Latinos might be improved through tangible changes which, at times, follow the very rhetoric of the Washington State Public Schools. I believe that the analysis of both of these aspects reflect the urgency for the improvement of Washington's educational system with a special emphasis on how to close the achievement gap between Latino and non-Hispanic white students while attempting to improve the state's dwindling Latino graduation rate. I found that current practices of the state for LEP students are oftentimes ineffective and ignore exhaustive research on which types of programs are effective. My report argues that the WASL is not an effective means of improving actual student achievement, hurts graduation rates, and still costs the taxpayers millions of dollars. Two

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<sup>1</sup> I adhere in this report to the prevalent terminology Limited English Proficient (LEP) though others have begun to increasingly use the term "English Language Learners" (ELL).

different states are used as touchstones—California with its anti-bilingual Proposition 227 that has negatively impacted its LEP education represents pitfalls Washington State would be wise to avoid, and in Texas where there are a number of schools moving toward greater and more comprehensive educational systems for its LEPs that Washington might be wise to follow. There is a great body of research dedicated to educating Spanish-speaking LEPs in a way that can help close the achievement gap for Latino students. It will be very important in the future if Washington State responds to or ignores this research of which my report is just a small sampling.

## METHODS AND LITERATURE

I began my research with articles broadly discussing K-12 education, Latinos, standardized testing in their abstract forms and then focused in on the WASL as well as information on graduation rates in light of a potentially significant achievement gap between Latino and non-Hispanic white students. The website of the Washington State public schools certainly informed my project and I was able to mine a great deal from organizations such as the Washington School Research Center, the Linguistic Minority Research Center in California, the University of Washington Center on Reinventing Public Education, and the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. I also pursued sources recommended by Cynthia Selde, coordinator for the Washington State University learning center, Whitman College librarian Lee Keene, and Bilingual Coordinator of the Walla Walla public schools Cindy Gregoire amongst others.

My research in the local community of Walla Walla which mainly consisted of conversations, interviews, and personal observations provided a perspective on the K-12 education of Latinos that is very connected with the rest of the state. The Walla Walla School District's LEP students are 95.2% Spanish-speaking, making it the ninth-highest concentration in the state.<sup>2</sup> Additional contacts in Walla Walla included Assistant Superintendents Rich Carter and Linda Boggs, district migrant home visitor Melito Ramirez, as well as the principals of Sharpstein Elementary, Green Park Elementary and Pioneer Middle School and various instructors involved in the LEP instruction at the elementary and middle school levels. These contacts provided me with a sense of the schools' current relationship with bilingual education and the WASL, how they are responding to much of the same research I've investigated, and where the city-wide bilingual education is immediately and eventually headed. On a patron tour of the public schools I observed Sharpstein Elementary and Pioneer Middle School and I also sat in on a meeting between parents, teachers, and administrators at Green Park discussing the possibility of extending a Transitional Bilingual Program through 5th grade. A similar experimental model of dual-language immersion which continues through 5th has already been adopted and is in-effect at Sharpstein starting with this year's first-graders.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Bylsma, Pete and Lisa Ireland and Helen Malagon. *Educating Limited-English-Proficient Students in Washington State; Annual Report of the State Transitional Bilingual Instruction Program*. Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. January 2002. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately there is no data related to the success of Sharpstein's program because it began just this year.

Melito Ramirez connected me to the members of my formal interview—a Latino family whose three daughters of various ages attend Walla Walla schools and have gone through the experience of being LEPs. The middle daughter is in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and will take the WASL assessment test this coming spring as a new graduation requirement thus making their story especially salient for my project.

All of the information I gathered pushed me in the direction of my project's central questions: 1) What is the context and content of the achievement gap between Latino and non-Hispanic white students? 2) How are Washington's LEP students, who are predominantly Latinos, educated K-12? 3) What is the ideal education for LEP students and how is this paralleled or contrasted by the practices of Washington's public schools? 4) The WASL: How does it affect Latinos and, specifically, might it impact already low graduation rates? Should it be a graduation requirement as it is now imposed? Is all of the money currently being spent on the WASL assessment test merited or are there better possible allocations?

### *THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP*

My first inquiry is the achievement gap between Latino and non-Hispanic white students. The historical context and current impetus for analysis derives from the growing number of Latinos in Washington State. As the number of Latinos increases in the state, a gap in the achievement levels of students from its largest racial minority might be seen as especially troubling and an issue demanding our concern. A report from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) and the Washington State Academic Achievement and Accountability Commission (WSAAAC) measures the depth of this gap using the practical information provided by scores on the WASL examination.<sup>4</sup> The method of the report was to focus not only on the percentage of students meeting the required passing standards, but of scale scores and students' proximity to the cut-off. The findings are described as "medium to large gaps" between nonwhite and white/Asian students.<sup>5</sup> This article, along with many other available sources, points to a formidable achievement gap between Latinos and non-Hispanic whites. In light of this gap I think it is important both to attempt an explanation and then, if we are to take seriously our duties as members of a united society, try to ameliorate the achievement gap.

The same report by the CRPE and WSAAAC using national research attempts to account for the achievement gap between nonwhites and whites in the Washington State public schools by pointing to a few hypothetical causes. The main factors cited are the following: 1) *Poverty and Related Factors*—"numerous studies have documented a strong relationship between family income and student achievement; a relationship that is

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<sup>4</sup> The report referred to in this section is the following: Huggins, Elise and Mary Beth Celio. *Closing the Achievement Gap in Washington State: Holding Schools Accountable for Equity*. Center on Reinventing Public Education and the Washington State Academic Achievement and Accountability Commission. November 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Huggins, i.

closely tied to race.”<sup>6</sup> The study then recognizes, although this is an important factor, that with students of comparable incomes Latino students still across-the-board had lower educational attainment than non-Hispanic whites. 2) *Educational Resources*—“the level of educational resources impacts student performance. This effect is particularly strong for low-income students and students of color. There are vast inequities in the distribution of educational resources, which result in disparities in student performance.”<sup>7</sup> The study recognizes that schools with high percentages of minorities typically have less educational resources than comparable-sized schools with less minorities. 3) *Funding*—“Districts with the highest enrollments of low-income students and students of color had less money to spend per student than districts with the lowest enrollments.”<sup>8</sup> The authors point to the ways that less allocated funds imply less educational resources available to students and, therefore, students with lower overall educational attainments. Another claim made is that the majority of research on this subject takes place district by district or state by state whereas “*within* a given district, schools with particularly disadvantaged students are likely to have fewer resources.”<sup>9</sup> In reference specifically to Washington State, districts with the highest poverty rates have \$99 fewer state and local dollars to spend per student compared with the lowest-poverty districts; a difference that translates into a total of \$2,475 for a typical classroom of 25 students.<sup>10</sup> 4) *Teacher Talent*—The article finds that student achievement is affected directly by the quality of instruction (if teachers are well-qualified and fully certified in their subjects). This forms a dubious relationship with certain data compiled by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). OSPI notes that in Washington State schools, “fewer than half of all teachers of LEP students have an ESL endorsement”<sup>11</sup>.

My most important findings in reference to this recognizable achievement gap in students’ overall educational attainments are that specific factors can be pointed at to help explain it. Simultaneously all of these factors seem to be working specifically and structurally against Latinos in Washington State. In light of this, it is not at all surprising that another related study by the WSRC dedicated to examining the efficacy of various educational models for Washington State public schools recognizes that “Hispanic students in Washington State have scored below the state average every year of the WASL, and the gap remains wide.”<sup>12</sup> The same article notes that “for schools with high percentages of Hispanic students we were unable to identify schools for study that we could classify as “highly successful”.”<sup>13</sup> We might glean from this the description of a significant achievement gap for Latinos to overcome. Therefore, my next natural inquiry

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<sup>6</sup> Huggins, 26.

<sup>7</sup> Huggins, 27-28.

<sup>8</sup> Huggins, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Huggins, 28. Also see “The other Gap: Poor students Receive Fewer Dollars,” *Education Trust Data Bulletin*, March 6, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Brennan, Jeanna. *The Funding Gap: Low-Income and Minority Students Receive Fewer Dollars*. Washington DC: The Education Trust, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Bylsma, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Baker, Duane and Martin Abbott and Heather Stroh. *Effective Practices for Hispanic Students in Washington State: Lessons Learned from Texas Schools*. Research Report, Washington School Research Center, July 2003. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Baker, 3.

is the manner in which Latinos are educated. Where there are successes and where there are failures?

Washington State is a state with quickly growing numbers of LEPs, a high concentration of whom are Spanish-speaking.<sup>14</sup> In Washington the numbers of LEPs served by public schools has risen above 70,000. Of those LEPs more than 60% are Spanish-speaking.<sup>15</sup> One might easily see how Latinos are specifically affected by LEP education and its efficacy. So it is important to examine which types of programs are currently being utilized in the education of LEPs.

### *WASHINGTON STATE LEP EDUCATION*

OSPI describes the type of LEP education Latinos receive as a *Transitional Bilingual Instruction Program* (TBIP). The annual OSPI report on bilingual education acknowledges that the education is primarily a responsibility of the state and local governments. Extra state funding has its origins in Washington's Transitional Bilingual Instruction Act of 1979 (amended in 1984) now referred to as Title I funding. The expressed purpose of Title I funding is to develop competence in English language skills for LEP students. This is reflected in Washington's TBIP program which uses the LEP's native language as a bridge to English where a gradual increase in English-usage signals a subsequent decrease of the LEPs native language. OSPI cites the data that "although the program is for "bilingual instruction," relatively few students in the program actually receive much formal instruction in their primary language."<sup>16</sup> Currently program funding is intended only for K-12 students who have a primary language other than English *and* whose English language skills must be sufficiently deficient. In this light, it seems that Washington's TBIP is intended not to educate bilingually, rather to transition LEPs as quickly as possible over to the predominant usage of English. The TBIP is prescribed by OSPI to "provide temporary services for up to three years until LEP students can develop adequate English language skills."<sup>17</sup> In light of this report I echo that Washington State commonly attempts within three years of entrance into the TBIP program to transition LEPs to the predominant use of English.

We might now look at Washington's K-12 education of Spanish-speaking LEPs in light of their ideal education as discovered by various scholars and researchers to examine whether Washington is providing or withholding the most effective types of education.

### *THE IDEAL LEP EDUCATION*

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<sup>14</sup> As mentioned earlier in my discussion of the Latino achievement gap, there is less funding for minority students in Washington State and now the education of LEP students is especially important as it focuses so strongly on an issue that directly affects Latinos much stronger than any other demographic.

<sup>15</sup> Bylsma, 20, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Bylsma, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Bylsma, 2.

There is a wealth of scholarly research examining the ideal education for K-12 LEP students. My research was informed especially by the findings of the Washington School Research Center (WSRC), The Linguistic Minority Research Institute (LMRI), and the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (NCBE). In reference specifically to Washington State's Latinos my research examines the successful and unsuccessful programs currently at work in the nation for LEP students and how those of Washington's public schools might continue or change their current practices in light of these findings. Two other states, California and Texas, are examined in reference to certain failures in California schools and certain successes in Texas schools.

First, it is important to draw out the ideal education of LEP students. In a research report by the WSRC the programs of schools from certain other states that successfully close the achievement gap between Latinos and non-Hispanic whites are analyzed. Predominantly, the successful model for LEP instruction is one that includes Bilingual Classes and Primary Language Instruction.<sup>18</sup> Successful schools following this model demonstrated the constant and consistent improvement of student's academic language abilities. When students from these programs are gradually, if ever, transitioned to exclusive English-language instruction (as opposed to continued Bilingual programs) there is only a nominal achievement gap between LEPs and native-English speakers as opposed to the medium to large gaps of Washington state.<sup>19</sup> This data is echoed in the research of the NCBE who tracked the achievement levels (of all academic areas, not just English usage) of more than 700,000 students in geographically-distinct areas over the duration of LEP students' K-12 education.<sup>20</sup> The NCBE found in this exhaustive study that "many English learners receive instructional programs that are too short-term in focus or fail to provide consistent cognitive development in students' first language, or allow students to fall behind their English-speaking peers in other school subjects while they are learning English, or are not cognitively and academically challenging, or are poorly implemented."<sup>21</sup> One of the relevant points here that might warrant some clarification is the idea of programs that focus too much on short-term results. In the NCBE report, Thomas and Collier find a model showing certain types of LEP education that show early gains but later betray the LEPs. Examples of this are the swift transition of a student to the predominant use of English before the students are properly prepared which later can lead to students who are not academically proficient in either their primary language or in English.

Another question is how fast students should be transitioned to English? How long does it take for students to effectively learn a second language in an academic setting? I believe that these questions address important elements of LEP student learning and achievement in a fundamental and long-term way. A study conducted by the LMRI examining numerous school districts in the United States as well as in Canada and prior

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<sup>18</sup> Fouts, Jeffrey and Martin Abbott and Duane Baker. *Effective Practices for Hispanic Students in Washington State*. Research Report, Washington School Research Center, Summer 2003. 19.

<sup>19</sup> See page 4 of this report.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas, Wayne P. and Virginia Collier. *School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students*. NCBE Resource Collection Series. George Mason University. 1997.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas, 15.

research on the subject attempted to ascertain the length of time required for proper second-language acquisition. The findings of the study were that “oral proficiency takes 3 to 5 years to develop, and academic English proficiency can take 4 to 7 years.”<sup>22</sup> So, in other words, if an LEP student enters kindergarten with no English-language ability they should not be completely transitioned until sometime between 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades. Contrast this with Washington State’s currently implemented TBIP which seeks to transition all students by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.<sup>23</sup> The LMRI report even acknowledges research stating that it might consistently take 10 years for LEPs to properly transition to English.<sup>24</sup> I find here an obvious discrepancy between what has been researched and is considered to be effective and what is actually in practice in Washington State. Here the analysis of unsuccessful programs in California and successful programs in Texas might demonstrate this research and concretely root certain theoretical elements of the research which were presented in this section.<sup>25</sup>

### California Schools

An article by Patricia Gandara of the LMRI examines California’s Public Schools and mistakes that have been made in the K-12 education for LEPs. Gandara writes in light of the passing of California’s anti-bilingual Proposition 227 in 1998. The idea behind Prop. 227 was to enact a system that transitioned LEPs very quickly to English and stopped allocating funds for a variety of programs that were expensive and, the rhetoric of the Proposition argues, ineffective. Gandara notes that “the mandated pedagogical strategy was to place English learners for a period not normally to exceed one year in “sheltered English immersion” classes.”<sup>26</sup> In the public schools of California, LEPs are encouraged to quickly reach certain levels of achievement as required by statewide tests. This is a strategy that might seem hard to argue with, if these gains remain throughout the student’s schooling. Instead, the researchers found “a consistent pattern of erosion of strong literacy practices in favor of “bottom line” instruction aimed at yielding short-term gains on statewide tests in English.”<sup>27</sup> Gandara finds that instructors are so steadfastly attempting perceived gains for the LEP students that later these educational strategies betray the students and they are left without fully-developed linguistic abilities either in English or Spanish. This data fits together with that of Thomas and Collier as both studies observe early gains for LEPs educated as quickly as possible in predominantly English, but later great losses and a possible irreparability when the student’s linguistic abilities are fully developed neither in English or Spanish.

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<sup>22</sup> Hakuta, Kenji and Yuko Goto Butler and Daria Witt. *How Long Does it Take English Learners to Attain Proficiency?* University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute. January 2000. Abstract.

<sup>23</sup> See page 6 of this report.

<sup>24</sup> Hakuta, 1.

<sup>25</sup> California and Texas are effective models for Washington State because their LEPs are highly concentrated under the designations of Spanish-speaking and Latino (as in Washington) and also have overall high levels of LEPs so that the programs provide large numbers of test-subjects available for research.

<sup>26</sup> Gándara, Patricia. *Learning English in California: Guideposts for the nation. Latinos in the 21st Century: Mapping the Research Agenda*. Ed. Suarez-Orozco & M. Paez. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2000. 344.

<sup>27</sup> Gándara, 346.



This significant gap makes it difficult to do well in school or in any field upon graduating or dropping out from high school. In contrast to these failures, we might glean a more positive perspective if we are to look at the models of successful schools in Texas.

### **Texas Schools**

It is now instructive to analyze the programs employed in certain successful Texas schools that the Washington School Research Center deemed similar to schools in Washington.<sup>28</sup> In terms of the Second Language Instruction of the Texas schools, there is a multilateral approach to LEP education that greatly contrasts the more unilateral approach in California and Washington schools. “Schools have implemented a variety of different programs to support students with limited English proficiency including, half-day programs, leveled ESL classes, classroom primary language instruction, and ESL support in regular classrooms.”<sup>29</sup> One of the important differences worth noting here is how many different types of programs are offered. After all, are not LEP students diverse in their abilities and backgrounds? The WSRC case study illustrates a progressive and multi-faceted response to the multi-faceted issue of LEP education. Another important element in Texas is the quality of instruction—“since many teachers are ESL certified they are able to supplement whatever assistance students receive through special programs.”<sup>30</sup> I don’t find it at all surprising that highly-educated teachers with numerous educational strategies are able to better educate their students than under-educated teachers without proper educational materials nor institutional support. This might seem obvious, but I think it is very important for school districts to emphasize the quality of teachers they hire as well as the continuing education opportunities available to those teachers.

In the successful schools of Texas, by the time LEP students reach middle school they are gradually transitioned to English, providing less bilingual instruction in lieu of ESL. I argue that this model responds both to the predominant cultural paradigm of English as the language of power and to research related to when students should be transitioned to English in the ideal academic setting. Another important factor is that LEP students are always taught the same curriculum as native-English speakers, regardless of which language it is taught in, thus developing their proficiency in academic language. During the earliest state assessment testing, Spanish LEPs are exempt from the tests in English, but must take a Spanish-language version.<sup>31</sup> This might be one way to still emphasize assessment testing while not immediately transitioning LEP students to English.

According to both the NCBE and the WSRC, amongst other research, the most successful models for the education of LEP students include a significant level of bilingual instruction and/or primary language instruction. Contrastingly, schools that are

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<sup>28</sup> Similarities for comparison in this study included schools’ percentages of LEPs and poverty levels as judged by the percentage of students with free or reduced lunch status.

<sup>29</sup> Baker, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Baker, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Baker, 20.

unsuccessful in their LEP education show an absence of these types of programs and Washington State schools typically offer few programs in bilingual instruction and primary language instruction.<sup>32</sup> The next issue at hand is what we can learn from the graduation rates of Latinos in Washington State.

### *GRADUATION RATES*

Whether students are graduating from high school or not is one important measure of personal and instructional success. I believe this is an especially inquiry for Latino students in Washington State based on growing numbers and their interaction with LEP education. One difficulty is ascertaining reliable data as there is sometimes great discrepancy in the data of various sources.

An OSPI report on the graduation and dropout rates of Washington State students found an overall graduation rate of nearly 82% and a Latino graduation rate of nearly 72%.<sup>33</sup> These rates do not seem strikingly low, but it is worth questioning whether this given data is reliable. The Manhattan Institute for Policy Research (MIPR) took on a comprehensive study of Washington State graduation rates using funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation. Their findings were quite divergent from those of OSPI although they were researching the same students from the same schools in the same year. The MIPR study found that “only 67% of all Washington State public school students from the class of 2001 graduated from high school...this is significantly lower than the 82% graduation rate suggested by official Washington State statistics.”<sup>34</sup> Following further data gathered by the MIPR study, they find that the Latino graduation rate is only 47%--less than half of Latino students are graduating. But what are we to make of this discrepancy between data sets? The MIPR report argues that the method of OSPI research “simply involves counting the total number of students who officially dropped out of school across grades 9 through 12 in a given year divided by the total number of students enrolled in 9<sup>th</sup> grade the same year.”<sup>35</sup> One important distinction is that OSPI did not include students whose whereabouts are unknown as having dropped out whereas the MIPR study subtracted the number of graduating students from the total number of students who were enrolled. I argue that the MIPR data is more conclusive, recognizing that the OSPI report is limited by its method, saying: “the rate underestimates the actual percentage [of dropouts] because it does not include some students who were listed as ‘unknown’ but probably dropped out of school at some point.”<sup>36</sup> In light of this data, I argue that the graduation rates in Washington State are alarmingly low, especially for Latinos, and fall well below the national goal established by the Department of Education of 90%. When students are not graduating from high school they are left with few options for continuing education and the attainment of good jobs that allow societal upward mobility. This is especially true for minority

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<sup>32</sup> See Page 6 of this report.

<sup>33</sup> Bylsma, Pete and Lisa Ireland. *Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington's Counties, Districts and Schools*. Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. June 2003. 11, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Greene, Jay P. *High School Graduation Rates in Washington States*. Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. November 2002. Executive Summary.

<sup>35</sup> Greene, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Greene, 3.

demographics such as Latinos. I think that, based on Washington's low graduation rates, it will be informative to examine why students drop out from public schools.

### *STUDENTS OFTEN DROP OUT WHEN THEY ARE NOT SUCCESSFUL*

Research on how best to improve high school graduation rates resoundingly has found that early student success is the strongest predictor for later success and this affects graduation rates—students are much more likely to drop out when they've had academic struggles at school or have been held back at least once.<sup>37</sup> When students do poorly in school at any point they are less likely to graduate and, therefore, the success of early education (especially for LEP students who have the most difficulty) might be judged as extremely important. We must be aware of the NCBE observation that “the vast majority of English learners fail in the long term to close the initial achievement gap in all subjects with age-comparable native-English speakers” and that “the key to high school completion is students' consistent gains in all subject areas with each year of school sustained over the long term.”<sup>38</sup>

### *THE WASHINGTON STATE ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING (WASL)*

The WASL assessment test is now implemented as one of the graduation requirements for high school graduation for students of all Washington State public schools. Students must pass the 10<sup>th</sup> grade test in reading, writing, and math and this year's 10<sup>th</sup> grade class will be the first to experience this as a graduation requirement. Students also take the WASL for practice and indicators of current success in 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade. 10<sup>th</sup> grade students are given four total chances to pass the test and, if they still do not pass, will not be allowed to graduate. There are certainly advantages to assessment testing—states, schools and districts can receive valuable information about the student achievement and about where successes or failures are taking place. But there can also be many disadvantages to such testing and I sought to investigate whether or not the money spent yields a correlative improvement in student achievement.

The State has a new financial program, the Government Management Accountability and Performance (GMAP) which is overseen by Washington State Governor Christine Gregoire and is important in shaping the prescriptive elements of my research. The program requires each funding area (including education) to present tangible, quantitative results that are defensible for the funding of government programs. This is put in place to determine “whether citizens are receiving value for their tax dollars.”<sup>39</sup> As callous as it might seem to view education as a mere investment, this is the way the state must view it for decision-making on how best to allocate funds and I believe that it is in light of this financial program that we might judge certain educational elements of which the implementation of the WASL test is an extremely salient one.

<sup>37</sup> Gonzalez, R. *Peer Committee Report for Improving High School Graduation Rates*. The Peer Program of the Houston Independent School District. 2003.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas, 9, 15.

<sup>39</sup> Washington State Governor's Priorities. <<http://www.governor.wa.gov/gmap/>> 4 November 2005.

There is exhaustive research which shows that the WASL testing receives a very substantial allocation of tax dollars for what might be considered by common standards to be nominal increases in student achievement. One such study by the Washington State University Learning Center states that “there is no effect, that is, no positive impact on yearly student achievement as a consequence of the longitudinal administration of the Washington State Assessment of Student Learning (WASL).”<sup>40</sup> The study examined the educational success of students over a number of years as well as of the state as a whole. The same study asserts that this is not at all uncommon—18 measured states with high-stakes testing implementation, 17 of the states reported that student learning remained at the same level as it was before.<sup>41</sup>

In an article written for the Spokane *Spokesman-Review* Donald Orlich fleshes out the problems of the WASL’s efficacy and problems related to its funding and how the state assessment testing and its egalitarian facade fails our students. Orlich refers to findings from the 2003 WASL.

“The vast majority of children from low-income families, as measured by eligibility for free or reduced lunch, did not meet the standard. That is, they failed. Up to 96 percent of children classified as being in “special education” did not meet the standard. They failed. Hispanic children tend not to meet the standard. Migrant children at all levels tended to fail all WASL areas being tested.”<sup>42</sup>

Though the WASL testing is supposed to be a fair and honest assessment of student achievement, it seems as though the cards are unfairly stacked against minority demographics. Beyond this, the very test itself seems to have great flaws. Orlich cites research by the Washington Education Association which found a number of problems inherent to the test: 1) There is a 28.9% chance that a child’s test has been incorrectly scored. Oftentimes there are mistakes made in the grading. 2) It is not until students answers are read that the correct answers are determined. The test itself is overly subjective. 3) All the student tests are shredded and therefore no independent source might later check their scoring. In this way, a student could be kept from graduating because of incorrect scoring and there is no recourse that might be taken by the student, the school, or the parents.<sup>43</sup> This might seem like a somewhat absurd scenario, and I agree wholeheartedly with this assessment.

Orlich argues that Washington’s public education system is also made financially vulnerable by the WASL: “with passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 95 percent of all children in all categories—special education, non-English speakers and the like—must pass 95 percent of all WASL tests or either the federal

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<sup>40</sup> Orlich, Donald C. *An Examination of the longitudinal effect of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) on Student Achievement*. Education Policy Analysis Archives, 11 (18). June 2003. 8.

<sup>41</sup> Orlich, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Orlich, Donald C. *WASL examinations flunk on many levels*. *Spokesman-Review*, 8 September 2003.

<sup>43</sup> Orlich, *WASL*.

government or private contractors will confiscate local communities' public schools."<sup>44</sup> This threatening proposition for public schools asks whether actual student achievement and progress is still the main point of education? This issue emerged when I spoke to the Principal of Green Park elementary. He was faced with the possibility of extending the schools partial language immersion program from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade but cited the difficulty in light of funding issues and governmental pressures. He said that schools that under-perform on the WASL get a one-year grace period and the next year, if they haven't improved, start losing their funding. This means that teachers are pressured to transition LEPs to English as quickly as possible so they might score well on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade WASL even though this might later erode their academic language proficiency. The WASL truly deserves our great scrutiny. "Washington State policy makers must re-examine the intent of the WASL and the empirical data sets that analyze it to determine its educational worthiness and continued fiscal support."<sup>45</sup> A testimony delivered by Miebeth Bustillo-Booth, Public Policy Director for the Washington Education Association to the House Education Committee is also quite poignant.

"The WASL cannot continue to serve as at once a magnifying glass, a hammer, a carrot, a blow horn, a stop gate, and a train without negative consequences. If we were to oblige the train metaphor, the WASL as it is currently conceived will leave with many train cars empty, leaving many of our children, particularly those who are historically disadvantaged, behind. I doubt seriously this is what we intend."<sup>46</sup>

Bustillo-Booth is arguing that the WASL is being implemented unilaterally with the expectation that it will not only point out problems, but also solve them, receiving great influence in Washington State to determine who is allowed to be successful and which students, especially Latinos, might be structurally prevented from achieving success.

It is now important to draw this criticism of the WASL testing back to a tangible element, and that is the funding. Are we giving too much money to the WASL when various studies have cited a lack of actual rewards for schools and students? Might we not be better off spending taxpayer money elsewhere? Orlich elucidates this discussion in a particularly effective manner:

"School reform in Washington and 49 other states has been reduced to a single high-stakes test. Nearly \$1 billion has been spent on reform by the Washington Legislature [in the last year]. The WASL—for Washington Assessment of Student Learning—costs over \$100 million...with none of that funding supporting teachers' classrooms, student services, school programs, instructional materials, new books or teacher education."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Orlich, *WASL*.

<sup>45</sup> Orlich, 8.

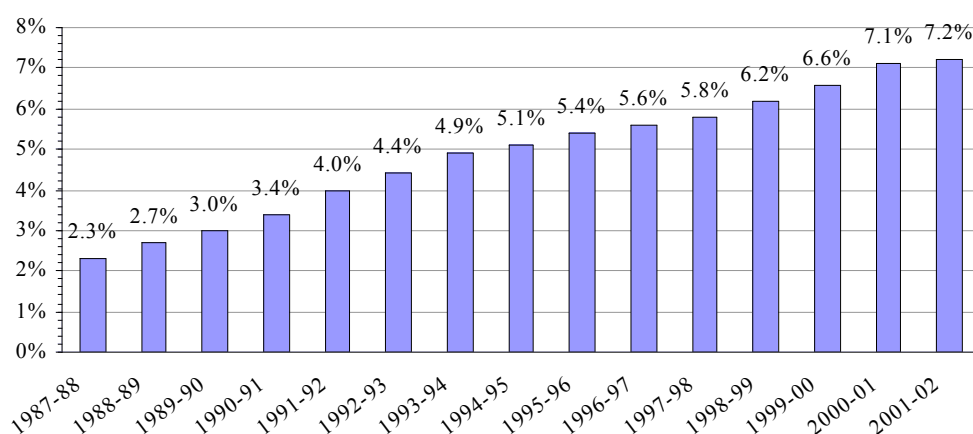
<sup>46</sup> Bustillo-Booth, Miebeth. Testimony before the House Education Committee, September 20, 2004. [http://www.washingtonea.org/static\\_content/ed\\_reform/testimony/Hse9\\_20\\_04.htm](http://www.washingtonea.org/static_content/ed_reform/testimony/Hse9_20_04.htm) (2 November 2005).

<sup>47</sup> Orlich, *WASL*.

Could some of this funding be re-appropriated to the training and hiring of teachers qualified in ESL, Primary Language Instruction in foreign languages, and Bilingual Education that could serve to aid the Latino students in Washington State as well as the state as a whole? The next section explains the quantitative data found over the course of my research.

## DATA PRESENTATION

**FIGURE 1.0**  
**The Percentage increase in LEP Students Statewide in Washington State**



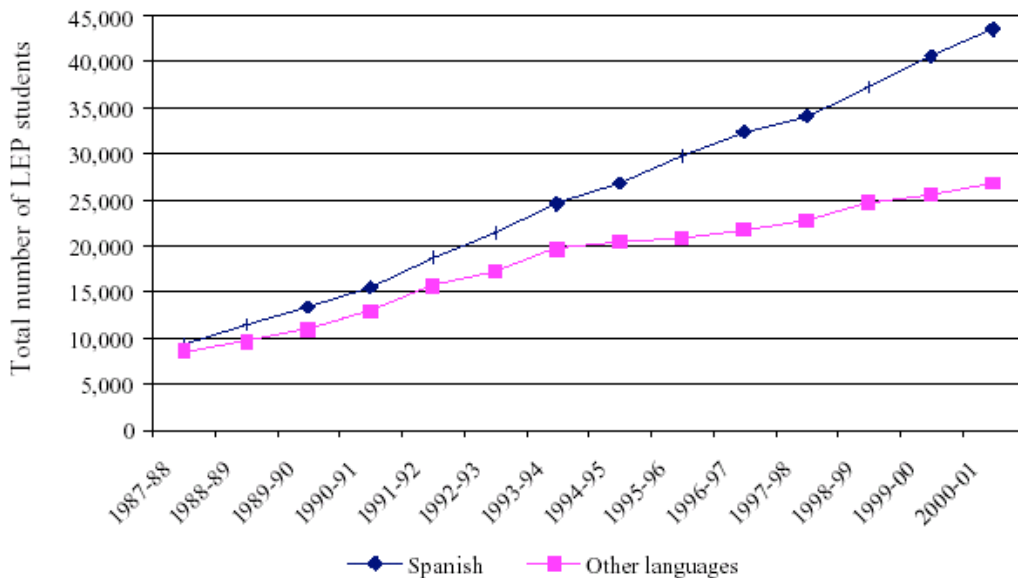
48

This graph highlights the basic fact that the state's numbers of LEPs are going up and, therefore, the importance of programs related to this demographic are of increasing importance. There are more LEPs every year in Washington, therefore the addressing of the achievement gap and of determining the ideal educational system is constantly of greater importance and is not an issue that will go away any time soon unless some type of broad-based action is taken that actually helps to solve the problem.

**FIGURE 2.0**  
**Growth of Spanish Speaking LEPs in Washington State<sup>49</sup>**

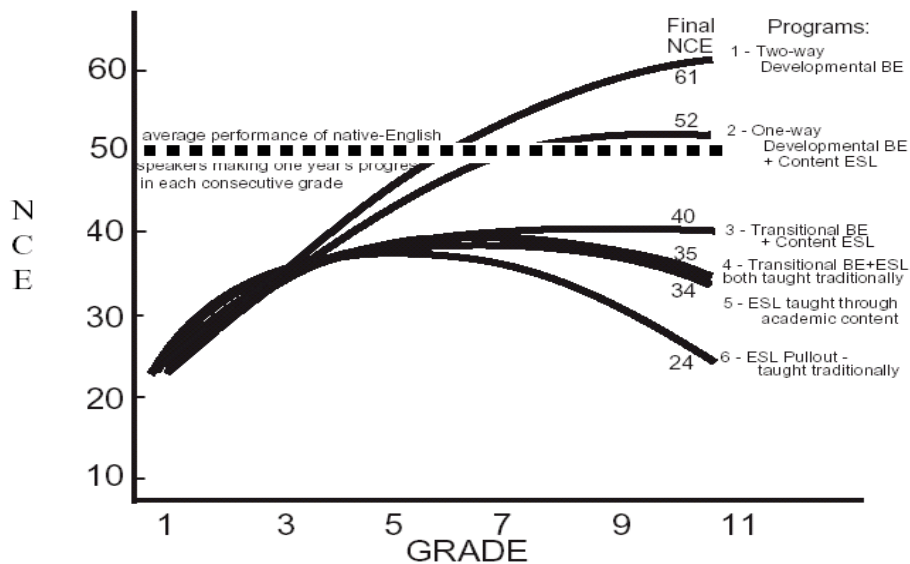
<sup>48</sup> Bylsma, 16.

<sup>49</sup> Bylsma, 24.



This graph highlights the growing number of LEP students in Washington State as well as the percentage increase in those who are Spanish-speaking and Latino.

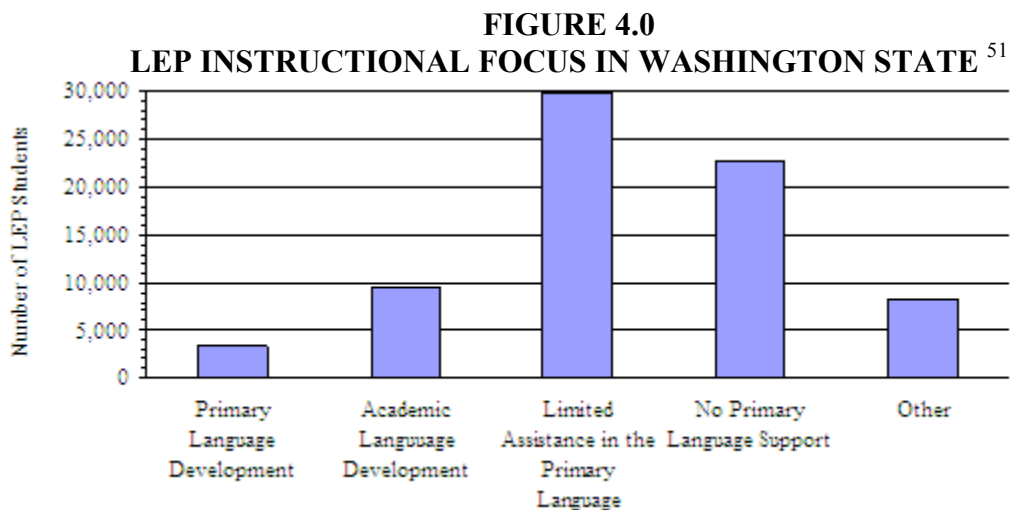
**FIGURE 3.0**  
**Education Attainments of LEP Students in Various Programs<sup>50</sup>**



This study analyzed the student performance under various educational models of over 700, 000 students across the country. The checkered line is native English-speaker performance. Notice how all the models begin close together, but the only consistent gains are found in the trajectory of developmental bilingual education programs which

<sup>50</sup> Thomas, 53.

provide primary language instruction. This contrasts with the programs of Washington State that provide little or no such instruction and can be found below the checkered line.



This graph shows which programs LEPs in Washington State experience in their education. Note that there is a predominant type lack of any significant Primary Language Instruction which is a very important element in the proper development of LEP students.<sup>52</sup>

**FIGURE 5.0**  
**WASHINGTON STATE GRADUATION RATES BY RACE**<sup>53</sup>

Asian-American	77%
Native American	47%
Latino	47%
African-American	53%
White	70%
<b>Total</b>	<b>67%</b>

This table shows the graduation rates in Washington States emphasizing not only how low the percentage is state-wide, but how minorities are especially prone to low graduation rates. This is especially true of Latinos. In respect to the WASL, one can see that if graduation rates were to take even a slight hit from those students who do not pass

<sup>51</sup> Bylsma, 12.

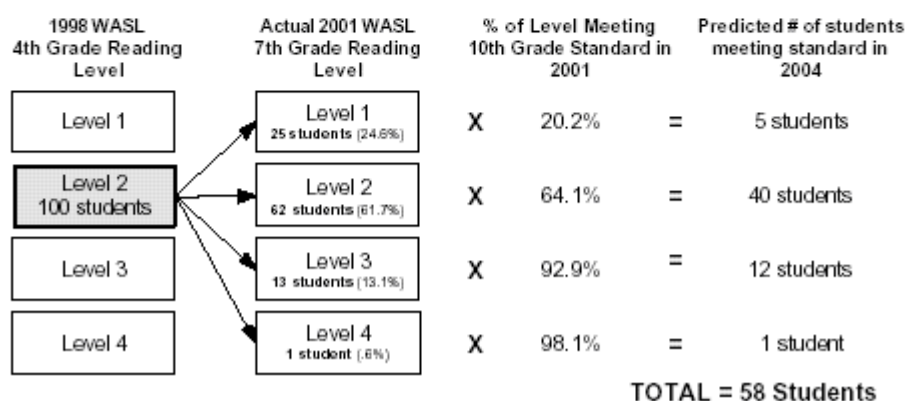
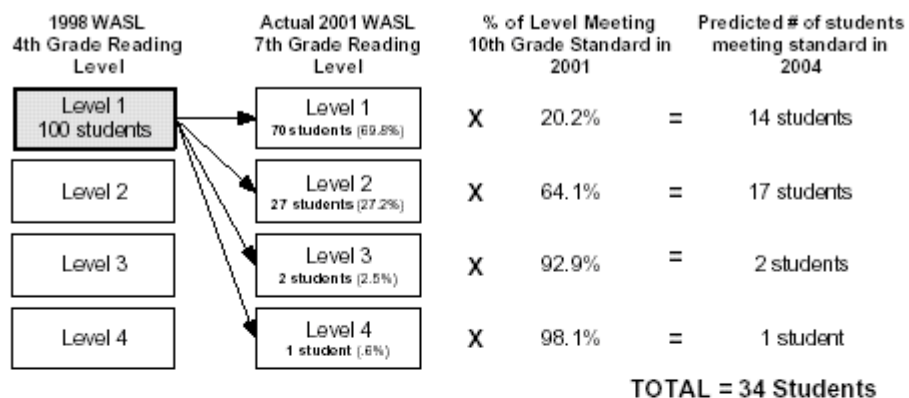
<sup>52</sup> See page 7 of this report.

<sup>53</sup> Greene, Jay P. *High School Graduation Rates in Washington States*. Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. November 2002. 1.



the test, then well under half of Latinos who entered Washington State's public schools would leave with a high school diploma.

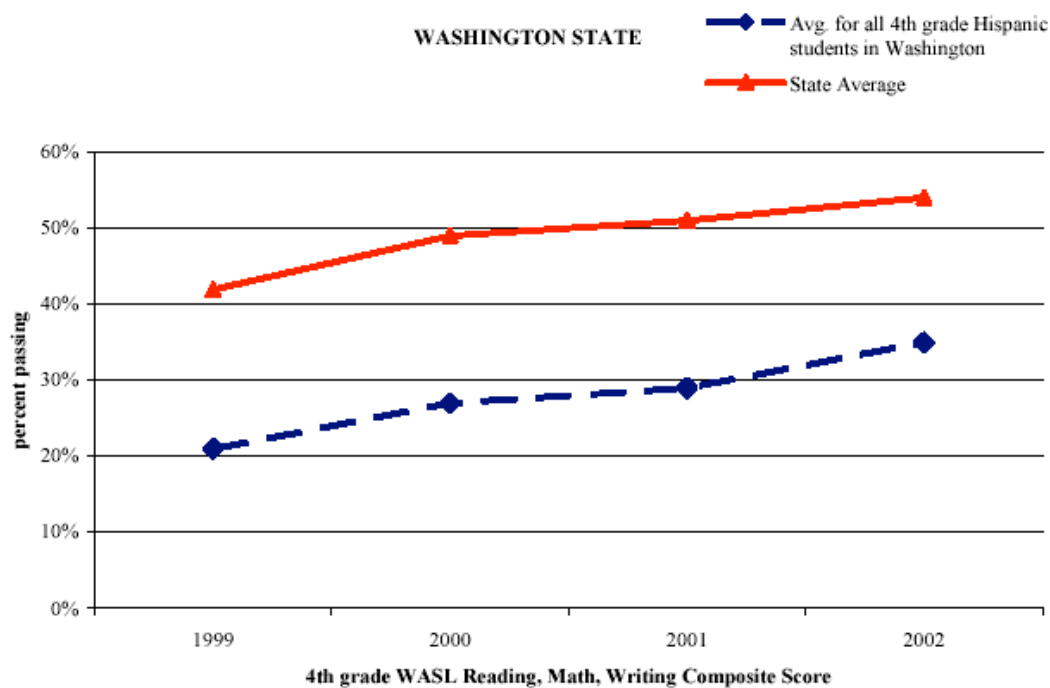
**FIGURE 6.0**  
**IMPROVEMENT OF WASL SCORES FOR LEVEL 1 STUDENTS<sup>54</sup>**



This model emphasizes the importance of students' early childhood education in their development and as a predictor for later success. For students who didn't pass the WASL in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, only 46% (92/200) will pass by the time they reach 10<sup>th</sup> grade. This shows not only how difficult it is for students to increase academic achievement, but that their first educational experiences (for many Latinos LEP education) very much shape the rest of their academic careers.

**FIGURE 7.0**  
**A Visual Representation of Washington's Latino Achievement Gap<sup>55</sup>**

<sup>54</sup> Fouts, Jeffrey and Martin Abbot and Duane Baker. *The Power of Early Success: A Longitudinal Study of Student Performance on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning, 1998-2001*. Research Report, Washington School Research Center. 2002. 7.



This graph shows visually one of the many examples of an achievement gap between Latino students and state averages. With so much space between the two lines, the gap seems undeniable. Taken with the earlier data about how important early childhood education development is for later education we might see how Latinos are being failed by their educational systems from the very outset.

### INTERVIEW DISCUSSION

For my interview, I used as my contact Melito Ramirez who interacts daily with the families of many Latino students in the Walla Walla public schools. The particular family I interviewed lived in College Place and shared a family history very connected to the nature of my project. The family moved from Mexico, the parents speaking little English, and one of their three daughters will take the WASL next spring as part of the updated Washington State high school graduation requirements. I thought they would be able to provide very important inside information on the WASL, Latino treatment in the schools, as well as personal anecdotes about various facets of their education that might shed additional light on the topics I was pursuing. The interview lasted about two hours including greetings, the setting up of equipment, and an informal discussion over coffee once the recording equipment was turned off. The interview took place both in English and Spanish: the daughters spoke English and the mother and father Spanish. I translated the questions and the transcript myself. The interview took place in the living room of

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<sup>55</sup> Fouts, *Effective Practices*, 3.

their family home with all three daughters, both parents, and myself in attendance. The interview was recorded using a cassette tape recorder.

The mother, Margarita, spoke to me about language and family influence:

“We have always emphasized that school is very important and that learning English is very important. English is the language of power and it is important that my children learn it or else they won’t be able to move up in the world and work how they want to work. We have always tried to make sure also that our daughters are brought up knowing how to properly speak in English and Spanish.”

This casts light on a very important issue with Latinos in Washington State which is the almost complete lack of Primary Language Instruction and, therefore, an erosion of their primary language. I was inspired to hear the daughters mention how their parents, who spoke very little English, always gave time to their kids and did their best to make sure that their Spanish was fluent and error-free. As one of the daughters, a high school senior named Rosa mentioned, the educational system in Walla Walla is just now starting to provide any substantial Primary Language Instruction:

“They’ve just now started a program at Wa-High [Walla Walla High School] called Spanish for Native Speakers. It’s a pretty hard class. Like, they used to have classes just for people to learn how to speak Spanish. Now they have this class. They’re just now learning that they’re pulling kids out of Spanish too early and making them speak English. Then they never learn to speak good Spanish—know where accents go and what syllables you stress and how to spell certain words. Yeah, but it’s just getting started and not that many people are in the class.”

Rosa also mentioned a definite sense of anxiety for herself and other Latinos in relation to the WASL testing even though they gave me the impression that they would be very well-prepared to pass the test. The mother who works with young children at one of the farm labor camps explained some of the WASL’s difficulties:

“In general it is a pretty hard test. Especially for Spanish speakers. They might know how to do a lot of things but only in Spanish and the test is in English. They’ve met with the parents and explained in Spanish what the test is all about which is helpful. But the test is still only in English. Some students have just come from Mexico as immigrants and they’re not gonna pass the test, they’re just not...when students are very intelligent but they fail because they don’t understand the test, that is just horrible.”

This reflects a definite theme throughout the interview that there is a strong distinction between intelligence and English language ability. The daughters experienced the schools trying to hold them back to remedial classes when they were younger based on their level of English when they had returned from school in Mexico. Some subjects taught in Mexico, especially Math and Science, were considered by the interviewees to be more instructive and challenging, and they felt advanced in those subjects. But they also mentioned that the staff and administrators at their school looked only at their language abilities and assumed they were slow in every other subject. This is clear evidence of school’s ignorance to actual academic ability versus English-language proficiency. Remember how the successful schools in Texas taught the same curriculum

in two languages and offered the early assessment tests also in Spanish.<sup>56</sup> This brings up the issue of whether or not the WASL should be offered in Spanish. The members of the interview definitely thought it should. Rosa said “that would give everyone a chance. Everyone who is smart could do well.” She later touched on the connection between the WASL and student dropout rates. This is a secondary effect related to the primary effect of poor WASL scores preventing a student from graduating high school. When asked if the WASL might make more students drop out, Rosa responded:

“Probably. Some students really want to finish high school, but if they don’t think they’ll be able to graduate they’ll just quit without talking to anyone about it. They’re afraid that if they try hard it won’t be good enough and that they’re not smart enough, why even try?”

Rosa narrates a very defeatist attitude that I hope the WASL isn’t spreading, but it does seem a plausible potential effect. The majority of the population is probably aware that better educational and employment opportunities exist with a high school diploma, but if a student thinks they’ll repeatedly fail the WASL and not be allowed to graduate, why would they postpone the inevitable and not just get a job wherever they get hired on?

In light of eventualities such as these I appreciated the active role the parents took in the students lives. Rosa shared one especially touching story. On her birthday her father asked her to get dressed in dirty clothes. She thought he was joking so she put on her normal clothes:

“Then he drives us out to the fields where he works and we spend the whole day picking cherries and other fruits, getting dirty and sweaty. Then he tells me that I’m not going to grow up to pick fruit and that I have to try in school or else this is what I’ll be doing my whole life. My parents have always helped out a lot. Even though they don’t speak much English they make sure that when we are speaking English we are speaking English and when we’re speaking Spanish we’re speaking Spanish. No Spanglish. My dad makes sure that our Spanish is good and that we know all the accents and everything. This way all of us can speak two languages and we’ll have an advantage that they never had.”

For my last question I asked the family what the biggest problem is in the local schools. It seemed like there was a real issue with the way Latinos are unfairly treated and unfairly tested:

Elena: “I don’t like how you take tests and they tell you if you’re good or bad. And when we come from Mexico even if we’re smart we get held back because of English when we’re good at other subjects. Kids start like a year back and then get angry because they feel dumb and that’s when they start getting in trouble.”

Margarita: “It’s bad how Mexicans and Whites are looked at differently in school. And you have Mexicans trying to act White and forgetting who they are. The families are not always helping them and the schools do nothing. The schools say that it’s good to be white and everything else is bad.”

In summation, the interview on one level provided me with some concordance with research I’d already pursued and opinions I’d already heard. On another level, they provided a new perspective for me with emotionally-charged language and the discussion

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<sup>56</sup> See page 9 of this report.

of the interplay between schooling in Mexico and America. The family expressed concerns about the WASL that seem to make sense and their discussion of a need for more and better bilingual education truly resonated with my project.

## **SYNTHETIC DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

I would now like to summarize the main findings and prescriptions of my report and then finish with two different educational models currently at work in two different elementary schools in Walla Walla. First, there is an achievement gap between Latinos and non-Hispanic white students and it is important to begin closing this gap. For LEP students in Washington State (the majority Latino) secondary language instruction programs are especially important and the majority of current programs are ineffective in improving student achievement as various research credited by even the office of the State Superintendent. The WASL state assessment test is now a graduation requirement for all students but might not provide any gains in student achievement and might not even gauge that achievement in a consistent and effective manner. If the test were to be implemented in Spanish until a certain age (as is the case in successful schools in Texas), this might help to close the gap and help prevent the devaluation of native languages that an over-emphasis on English can create.

We as a state are greatly emphasizing assessment testing and educational programs that could be greatly improved if they were better informed by and better reflecting the canon of research that is readily available. Of the millions in funding that education in Washington receives, not enough is allocated for programs, teachers, and materials that might actually improve the educational system for every student, especially for the minorities, LEPs and the economically-depressed whose average educational attainment is shockingly low. I argue that the educational goals for the state should emphasize the improvement of the quality of its education such that it graduates as many competent students as possible who are prepared to continue on with further education or a successful career.

In light of the academic literature and the information I have discovered, I find that the state of Washington to a certain extent fails its students. This is especially true of the expanding Latino demographic. This is not a holistic standpoint without exception, but by-and-large I find it to be true. If we are to look at each member of our society as someone who deserves the same basic rights of education, then we have a long way to go. There are steps in place for improvement, but it takes the concerted efforts of students, teachers, administrators, parents, cities, districts, the state, and even the national government itself.

I believe that it is important for the Latinos of Washington State to enhance their own power and let their voices be heard. For the voices, opinions, and concerns of the Latinos will strongly shape the future of this state and of this nation.

**APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

- 1) Are you from Walla Walla, College Place area originally?
- 2) What kind of education have you received?
- 3) What about the education of your daughters?
- 4) Tomas, what do you do for work?
- 5) And you speak only Spanish, no English?
- 6) Margarita, what is your opinion of your daughter's education?
- 7) And the quality of the education in Walla Walla?
- 8) And the Spanish classes are mainly for the white students, right? For them to learn to speak some Spanish and not for native speakers?
- 9) What do you know about the WASL test? What do you think about it?
- 10) Do you think the test would be better if it were also offered in Spanish?
- 11) Do you think the WASL test might make students more likely to drop out?
- 12) Has your family had any negative experiences in school related to being Latino?
- 13) Do you think your school has prepared you for graduation, what to do once you graduate? What your options are?
- 14) You have to take the WASL test to graduate this next spring. Are you nervous about that?
- 15) What about students that just arrive, say from Mexico, and don't speak much English and are supposed to pass the WASL in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Do you think they're teaching them English too fast?
- 16) Do you think it's a problem when English is stressed so much in school and the parents don't help out very much because they don't speak English and don't think they can help?
- 17) What is the biggest problem in the local schools?

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