



Tuesday, April 17, 2007 - 12:00 AM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

9th-graders getting jump on WASL

By Judy Chia Hui Hsu

Seattle Times staff reporter

He signed up for the WASL because his friends did.

Ninth-grader Kevin Twitchell didn't want to be left behind while his buddies registered for "the works" — reading, writing, math and science.

"I felt kind of nervous because they were getting all of it done, and I thought I should at least get some of it done," said Twitchell, 15, who goes to Kamiakin Junior High School in Kirkland. And that's how Twitchell got caught up in taking a test he doesn't have to take.

Only students in third through eighth and 10th grades are required to endure the Washington Assessment of Student Learning, which starts this week.

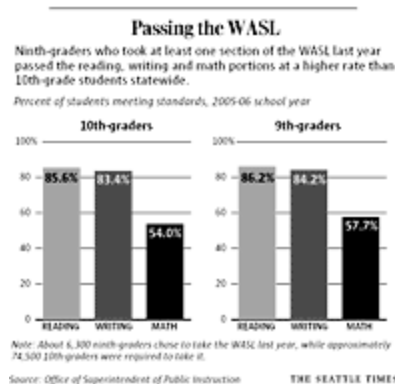
But some 14,000 ninth-graders statewide are expected to attempt at least one section of the 10th-grade WASL this year. That's more than double the nearly 6,300 students who took at least one portion of the test last year — the first time the WASL was offered to this group.

"We were all pretty amazed at the jump this year," said Molly O'Connor, a spokeswoman for the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, adding that she wasn't sure why the dramatic surge occurred other than a growing awareness of the new choice.

The option was made available to ninth-graders so that more advanced students — who were ready for the test and whose preparation for Advanced Placement exams would conflict with WASL testing in the 10th grade — could take the WASL a year earlier, O'Connor said.

This year's ninth-graders are able to take any or all sections of the WASL; last year, only reading, writing and math were offered.

Passing the reading, writing and math sections of the WASL is a graduation requirement beginning with the class of 2008, although legislation is pending to delay portions of it. Students can take the test up to five times for free.



This means that ninth-graders who take the WASL are using up one of their five opportunities. But those who do pass — including the 54.7 percent of the ninth-graders who met standards in reading, writing and math last year — won't have to take it again.

The early WASL-takers did exceptionally well: 86.2 percent passed in reading; 84.2 percent passed in writing; and 57.7 percent passed in math.

They did so well, in fact, that the self-selected group outperformed the entire sophomore class. Of the 10th-graders who took the test last year, 85.6 percent passed in reading; 83.4 percent in writing; and 54 percent in math.

Getting some graduation requirements out of the way is why the Everett School District has mounted an all-out campaign to encourage students to take the WASL early, said district spokeswoman Mary Waggoner. The district also wants to gather data on how students are performing academically before they enter 10th grade, she said.

Everett has more ninth-graders taking the test than any other district in the state. About 1,000 Everett students took the WASL last year, and more than one-third passed all three subjects. This year, nearly 1,200 students — or 68 percent of the district's ninth-grade class — will take the test.

The district encourages participation in various ways: school assemblies; newsletters sent home; and one-on-one conferences with teachers and counselors.

But juggling schedules and pulling kids out of classes means it'll be an irregular week for ninth-graders across the state. Teachers at districts such as Everett and Lake Washington have planned projects for students who will not be testing.

"We don't want to create a situation where the students are penalized when they're taking the WASL," said Traci Pierce, Lake Washington's director of teaching and learning. "And at the same time we don't want to create a situation where students who aren't participating in the WASL are doing nothing."

In the end, Twitchell signed up for only one section of the test.

"I worry what will he miss in his normal classes if he opts to take the WASL early," said his mother, Carol Lee Twitchell. "Plus, there's something to be said to give a 10th-grade test in, let's say ... 10th grade."

Judy Chia Hui Hsu: 206-464-3315 or jhsu@seattletimes.com

[Copyright © 2007 The Seattle Times Company](#)