

Raising Standards: What Our Kids Should Know and Be Able To Do

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The 1993 Education Reform Act

In 1993, the Washington State Legislature adopted the Education Reform Act of 1993 (RCW 28A.630.85) to establish common learning goals for all Washington students. . Oddly enough, Washington State had never had common goals for which students and educators were accountable. Earlier attempts to set standards left districts to develop their own lists, and there was no coherent attempt to measure achievement. Based on the 1993 legislation, four goals were established; designed to raise standards and student achievement. The four primary state learning goals are:

- GOAL 1** *Read* with comprehension, write with skill, and communicate effectively and responsibly in a variety of ways and settings.

- GOAL 2** *Know and apply* the core concepts and principles of mathematics; social, physical, and life sciences; civics and history; geography; the arts; and health and fitness.

- GOAL 3** *Think* analytically, logically, and creatively, and to integrate experience and knowledge to form reasoned judgments and solve problems.

- GOAL 4** *Understand* the importance of work and how performance, effort, and decisions directly affect career and educational opportunities.

The intent of the law is to "provide opportunities for students to become responsible citizens, contribute to their own economic well-being and to their families and communities, and enjoy productive and satisfying lives."

The law also established the Commission on Student Learning (CSL), an eleven member state body appointed by the Governor and the State Board of Education. It was directed to carry out the primary goals of the state's educational reform act, which included the following four major tasks:

1. Set clear, challenging academic **standards** based on the state's learning goals that every student in the state will achieve.
2. Create a sound **assessment** system that will determine how well students are achieving the higher academic standards.
3. Develop ways of holding schools, teachers, and students **accountable** for results.
4. Recommend **other steps** necessary to ensure that all students can meet expectations.

After much study, intense discussion, and thoughtful public debate, statewide academic standards were developed for the "basics"—reading, writing, communication, and mathematics, science, social studies, the arts, and health and fitness. The Commission adopted higher standards for reading, writing, communication and mathematics in 1995. In April of 1996, science, social studies (history, civics, geography, and economics), arts, and health and fitness were adopted. We call these standards Essential Academic Learning Requirements. They represent the specific academic skills and knowledge students will be required to meet in the classroom.

Integrated into the design of the Essential Academic Learning Requirements are the state's learning goals 3 and 4 as outlined in the Education Reform Act. Under the law, Goal 3 asked us to link thinking skills to the basics; Goal 4 asked us to link the Essential Academic Learning Requirements to the world of work. Ultimately, learners must understand the link between their personal efforts and performance in school and their decisions about future career and educational opportunities.

Taken together, the Essential Academic Learning Requirements in the four goal areas form a common core of subjects and skills that all students in Washington will be expected to master. Students must also develop the ability to be independent thinkers who can solve real-life problems and keep up with the latest developments. Students must also be able see the connection between their studies and their world.

In today's world, students need more than the ability to memorize facts to succeed. Schools must now more actively help students understand the meaning of facts. Students need to be able to see patterns and relationships between facts and ideas and use facts as tools for understanding and organizing concepts and principles.

The Essential Academic Learning Requirements, now even more defined as Grade Level Expectations, are clear targets for students and teachers across the state. Setting higher standards calls for better methods of measuring student and teacher performance. The details represent the specific academic skills and knowledge students are required to master and demonstrate in the classroom.

Note: The Commission on Student Learning (CSL) was sunsetted in 1999.