

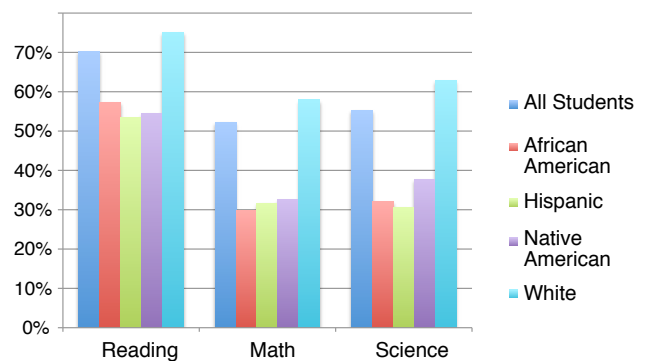
Is Washington State Still Waiting for “Superman”?

Director Davis Guggenheim’s (“An Inconvenient Truth”) new education documentary “Waiting for ‘Superman’” paints a troubling picture of educational opportunity and performance, but largely focuses on families and schools in some of the grittiest cities in America. It may be easy to brush off the movie’s message and ask, “What does this have to do with schools in Washington?” It turns out, however, the movie hits closer to home than we think.

Washington State’s minority and low-income students are increasingly falling behind.

- *On national tests, achievement for all Washington students has flattened and, in some subjects, the achievement gap has widened.* While Washington ranks just slightly higher than the national average on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, our scores have been flat in reading and math in both 4th and 8th grades over the last decade. More troubling, the achievement gap between white students and most other subgroups has widened over the last decade for 8th grade math. The gap has also widened between low-income and non-low-income Washington students.¹
- *On state tests, only one third of our state’s minority students are meeting standards in math and science.* Our most recent state assessment test, the Measurement of Student Progress (MSP), shows serious deficits in student achievement, particularly for minority students.²

**2009-10 Measurement of Student Progress (MSP) Results
8th Grade**



An inexcusable number of Washington State students never graduate from high school.

Washington currently has 32 high schools that are “dropout factories,” like those profiled in “Waiting for ‘Superman.’” In these schools, the 9th grade cohort size shrinks by 40% or more. More African American and Hispanic students attend these dropout factories than white students.³ Overall, only 68% of our state’s students graduate, a figure below the national average, and the numbers are far lower for our minority students—40% for Native Americans, 50% for African Americans, and 55% for Hispanics.⁴ Sadly, for many of those who do graduate, their diploma has little meaning. Of the 2004 high school graduates who began postsecondary education at Washington’s two-year and four-year colleges and universities within a year after graduating from high school, 37% (overall) enrolled in remedial mathematics and/or English courses.⁵

Washington State policies for improving student outcomes are outdated.

Washington was one of only 10 states that did not enter the first phase of the federal Race to the Top grant competition, which awarded hundreds of millions of dollars to states that showed a history of reform and progress and ambitious plans to improve education for their students. When Washington applied in the second round, the state proposed valuable changes to intervene in low-performing schools and improve teacher evaluations, but they simply are not enough. In the Race to the Top competition, Washington came in 32nd out of 36 states.⁶

Washington State offers few choices for students.

Washington, unlike 40 other states, has no charter school law. Without school choice, families’ options are limited to entering district “lotteries” to attend better schools elsewhere in their own or neighboring districts (if there is room),⁷ moving to a neighborhood or district with a better school, or opting out of public education to home school or attend private school. Without public school choice, many families that can afford to do so are opting out of public education altogether. In Seattle, the state’s largest urban district, 25% send their children to private schools, a rate that is twice the national average.⁸ For low-income families, there is virtually no choice.

Washington State needs to take bold action.

The 12 winning applications in the Race to the Top competition have a lot to share about what ambitious reforms look like:

- Winning states have targeted strategies to get strong teachers and leaders into high-poverty/high-minority schools and are able to swiftly remove ineffective teachers.
- Winning states have charter school laws that encourage charter school applications, offer fair funding and access to facilities, and take oversight seriously.
- Winning states have adopted high-quality graduation standards and assessments so that students leave high school capable of attending college and ready for careers.

What can parents, students, educators, community leaders, and business leaders, do after watching the movie?

Get informed. Go beyond your local newspaper for information about education. Some of the most innovative ideas are not to be found in your local community. Read the reports from neutral organizations. Some news sources and aggregations of news include *Education Week* (www.edweek.org), *Education Commission of the States* (www.ecs.org), and *The Hechinger Report* (www.hechingerreport.org). Ask yourself, what do you expect schools to accomplish and are all schools meeting these expectations?

Ask questions. For every time you are asked to take a volunteer tutoring position, contribute to a book drive or gift wrap sale, or vote for a school levy, ask and expect your district and local school to tell you how they are working to close the achievement gap.

Take action. Work with local education advocacy groups and coalitions. Some groups in Washington include:

- The League of Education Voters (<http://www.educationvoters.org/>)
- Partnership for Learning (<http://www.partnership4learning.org/>)
- Stand for Children (<http://www.stand.org/wa>)
- Excellent Schools Now Coalition (<http://www.excellentschoolsnow.org/>)
- Our Schools Coalition (<http://www.ourschoolscoalition.org/>)

For more ideas, visit the Done Waiting website (<http://www.donewaiting.org/>).

¹ NAEP data accessed at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/>. To see an array of data broken down over time for Washington State, see The Education Trust's Education Watch State Report, accessed at http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/Washington_0.pdf.

² MSP data for 8th grade students accessed at <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us>.

³ Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters, *Locating the Dropout Crisis*, Johns Hopkins University, September 2004, accessed at <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespap/techReports/Report70.pdf>.

⁴ *Diplomas Count 2010: Graduation by the Numbers*, EPE Research Center, June 2010, accessed at http://www.edweek.org/media/ew/dc/2010/digital/Diplomas_Count_2010_Digital_Edition.pdf.

⁵ <http://www.hecb.wa.gov/news/newsfacts/documents/Part3forWeb.pdf>.

⁶ *Race to the Top Phase 2 Final Results* accessed at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase2-applications/summary.pdf>.

⁷ Under Revised Code of Washington (RCW) 28A.225.200 through 28A.225.240, students have the right to request enrollment in a school district other than the district of their residence through a Choice Agreement. RCW 28A.225.270 (intradistrict/mandatory) RCW 28A.225.220 – 28A.225.240, 28A.225.280 – 28A.225.310 (interdistrict/mandatory)

⁸ Nationally, non-public school enrollment has remained at approximately the same percentage of total school-aged population for the past fifty years. According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement, between 10% and 11% of school-aged children attend private schools. In 2006-07, 24.2% of school-aged children attended non-public school in Seattle, based on the total number of students attending both non-public and Seattle Public Schools. See *Seattle Public Schools Enrollment Projections Report*, March 2008, accessed at http://www.seattleschools.org/area/facilities-plan/sps_enroll_sec1_04-08-08mtt.pdf.

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (www.crpe.org) was founded at the University of Washington in 1993. CRPE engages in independent research and policy analysis on a range of K-12 public education reform issues, including choice & charters, finance & productivity, teachers, urban district reform, leadership, and state & federal reform. CRPE's work is based on two premises: that public schools should be measured against the goal of educating all children well, and that current institutions too often fail to achieve this goal. Our research uses evidence from the field and lessons learned from other sectors to understand complicated problems and to design innovative and practical solutions for policymakers, elected officials, parents, educators, and community leaders.