

POLICY NOTE

How Washington's School Achievement Index became the School Spending Index

By Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education

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Key Findings

1. The first School Achievement Index in 2010 ranked Washington's public schools as "Exemplary, (A)" "Very Good, (B)" "Good, (C)" "Fair, (D)" or "Struggling, (F)," based on their performance educating students.
2. That Index embarrassed school officials, since it showed 597,000 of Washington students, over half, were assigned to schools ranked as "Fair, (D)" or "Struggling, (F)."
3. State Board of Education Chair Jeff Vincent weakened the Index, so that by 2017 it showed 162,000 students assigned to low-quality schools.
4. In March 2018, State Superintendent Chris Reykdal and the State Board of Education canceled the Index, replacing it with a new School Improvement Framework.
5. The new Framework no longer identifies schools by performance, but shifts responsibility for failing to educate students from schools to taxpayers.
6. Top down initiatives like the Index have failed or been repealed again and again.
7. Giving parents school choice provides direct, bottom-up accountability for school performance.

Introduction

For years state officials have said education administrators should produce an annual assessment of public schools "that is simple to use and understand" so parents and the general public can be informed about the quality of education public schools are providing to the people of Washington.¹ The promise was based on the idea that informing the public about the strengths and weaknesses of local schools would lead to consistent improvements that would eliminate the achievement gap, reduce the dropout rate, and increase learning for all students.

The School Achievement Index

To implement this idea the legislature in 2009 directed the State Board of Education to create a clear School Achievement Index to measure the success or failure of each of Washington's 2,300 schools in educating students to the learning standards set by the state.

The new law ordered the State Board of Education to produce a School Achievement Index that was:²

- Based on criteria that are fair, consistent, and transparent;
- Included "graduation rates and results from statewide assessments";
- Was "...easily understood by both employees within the schools and school districts, as well as parents and community members";
- "Provided feedback to schools and school districts to self-assess their progress";
- Identified exemplary schools and failing schools that needed help to achieve exemplary performance.

Governor Jay Inslee endorsed the idea, saying the public should have access to "a system in which every school in the state receives a letter grade that's accessible to parents."³

1 "Washington School Achievement Index," Revised Code of Washington, 28A.657.110, Section 2.

2 Ibid.

3 "On education, McKenna and Inslee have similar ideas, but charter schools remain a key difference," by Brian Rosenthal, *The Seattle Times*, July 22, 2012.

The purpose of the Index was to give parents and taxpayers a clear, understandable measure of each school's performance in serving the learning needs of students. The Governor and the legislature's intent was that administrators would respond to public pressure and ensure that every child in Washington received a high-quality public education.

The first School Achievement Index

In 2010, the State Board of Education released the first School Achievement Index.⁴ It rated each public school based on student test scores in reading, writing, math, and graduation rate. Schools were placed in one of five categories: Exemplary (A), Very Good (B), Good (C), Fair (D), and Struggling (F). As the legislature directed, these rankings were clear and direct, easy for the public to understand.

Washington Policy Center published Index results, and distributed them to newspapers and radio across the state.

School administrators, however, complained the Index was a source of embarrassment for them, particularly for principals and teachers at the 1,208 schools ranked as Fair (D) and Struggling (F). District officials were uncomfortable with state reports showing they had assigned 597,000 students to attend these poor-quality schools.⁵

Weakening the School Achievement Index

In response, Chairman Jeff Vincent and other members of the State School Board weakened the School Achievement Index by changing the ranking system and shifting away from measuring actual student learning to estimating student growth. The weaker standard made school administrators look better to the public.⁶

By 2017, the School Achievement Index showed that even under the weakened standard nearly one in six public schools ranked as Underperforming (F) or below (see table). The Board found that administrators had still assigned more than 162,000 students to low-quality schools.

4 "An Excellent and Equitable Education for All Students: A State and Local Partnership for Accountability," State Board of Education, April 22, 2010, at <http://sbe.wa.gov/documents/2010.04.22%20accountability%20report.pdf>.

5 "The Washington Policy Center Public School Accountability Index; New state ranking shows more than half of children attend low-performing schools," by Liv Finne, Policy Note, Washington Policy Center, February 2011, at <https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/library/doclib/School-Accountability-IndexPN.pdf>.

6 "Accountability System Resolution – Washington State Board of Education," by Washington State Board of Education, July 12, 2012, at: <http://www.sbe.wa.gov/documents/2012.07.12%20Accountability%20Resolution.pdf>; "State Board of Education weakens School Achievement Index," by Liv Finne, Washington Policy Center Blog, July 24, 2013, at <https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/detail/state-board-of-education-weakens-school-achievement-index>.

**School Achievement Index – 2017
based on weakened assessment standards
Washington State Board of Education**

Category	Letter Grade	Number of Schools	% of all Schools	Number of students
Exemplary	A	91	4.5%	45,000
Very Good	B	276	13.6%	191,640
Good	C	551	27.1%	338,866
Fair	D	551	27.1%	286,675
Underperforming	F	256	12.6%	121,094
Lowest Five Percent	F-	109	5.4%	41,077
Not rated		192	9.5%	40,492

Superintendent Reykdal cancels the School Achievement Index

In March 2018, state Superintendent of Public Instruction Chris Reykdal announced he had cancelled the School Achievement Index and replaced it with a measure called the Washington School Improvement Framework (WSIF).⁷

He said that, instead of reporting to the public on the quality of education children receive, “schools will partner with OSPI to develop programs to improve student performance that will work best for their local schools and communities.”⁸ Parents and the public would no longer receive objective information about school quality based on clear and easy-to-understand standards.

He cancelled the school-assessment transparent categories of Exemplary (A), Very Good (B), Good (C), Fair (D), and Underperforming (F). Instead, the new WSIF assesses schools based on an invented rating called “Support Tiers,” that is, by how much more budget money Superintendent Reykdal and school officials believe they should receive.

An evidence-based state assessment intended to inform policymakers and parents was replaced by a subjective system designed to argue for increased education spending.

Assessing schools based on spending, not learning

The policy shift changed a state ranking from one that informed the public about levels of learning achievement to one that calls for some schools to receive more public money.

Under WSIF, officials assign each school an average score from one to 10, based on academic indicators, graduation rates, and proficiency on state tests in math and

⁷ “Washington Releases New School Accountability Index under ESSA,” press release, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, March 15, 2018, at <http://www.k12.wa.us/Communications/PressReleases2018/AccountabilityIndex.aspx>

⁸ Ibid.

English. WSIF also adds three additional non-academic measures: attendance, 9th graders on track to graduate, and the presence of dual credit and advanced courses.

Under WSIF, high-performing, average and low-performing schools are no longer identified, nor do state officials report how many students administrators send to poor-quality public schools each year.

Successful schools are no longer recognized, but are lumped into a single category labeled “Foundational Supports.” Lower-performing schools are grouped under headings called “Support Tier 1, Support Tier 2, and Support Tier 3.”

Under the altered system, the Washington School Improvement Framework for 2018 reports on all 2,382 public schools and education programs in Washington.

Washington School Improvement Framework - 2018 Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction

Support Tier	Number of Schools	Percentage of Schools	Student Enrollment
Foundational Supports	1483	62%	688,069
Support Tier 1	484	20%	251,205
Support Tier 2	160	7%	94,625
Support Tier 3	252	11%	54,429

Policy Analysis

Superintendent Reykdal is actively promoting the WSIF, in contrast to the minimal attention state officials devoted to the more rigorous assessments of the School Achievement Index. He says the new Framework allows the public to “really dive” into the performance of individual schools.⁹ Unfortunately, only officials within the system are in a position to understand this approach. The average member of the public with limited time will be unable to unravel the complex and opaque WSIF.

Further, instead of identifying schools by performance, the new Framework’s ranking system identifies schools by the level of money officials believe they should receive. Failing schools are no longer identified by their performance. Instead of accountability to the public, the WSIF creates a bureaucratic incentive to continue failed policies and press for more funding.

The Superintendent has changed a ranking system meant to inform the public into one that shifts responsibility for school failure to taxpayers.

The end of the School Achievement Index provides important lessons for state legislators. Within eight years, the Superintendent of Public Instruction and the State Board of Education have transformed the School Achievement Index into a School Spending Index.

⁹ “Washington implementing new system for judging schools,” by Thomas Clouse, *The Spokesman-Review*, April 19, 2018 at <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2018/apr/18/washington-implementing-new-system-for-judging-sch/#/0>.

Another failed education reform

The downfall of our state's School Achievement Index joins a lengthening list of failed but once-trumpeted education reforms. Over the last thirty years, every proposed federal and state effort to hold the public schools accountable for performance has failed to improve the schools. Here are some examples:

- Goals 2000 (Clinton Administration)
- No Child Left Behind (Bush Administration)
- Race to the Top (Obama Administration)
- The Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL, a bi-partisan state-level testing requirement)
- Common Core (promoted by the Gates Foundation)
- Every Student Succeeds Act (Obama Administration)

Policy recommendation: adopt policies that offer families school choice

In contrast to this list of failed initiatives, policies based on school choice, rather than top-down regulation, are providing a practical solution. Parents offered educational choice are in the best position to find schools that suit the learning needs of their children.

One of the benefits of school choice is improved school accountability. School districts where parents are allowed choice tend to treat parents as valued partners rather than as the passive recipients of decisions issued by the central office.

School choice options include public charter schools, online learning, vocational schools, tutoring services, tuition vouchers, tax credit scholarships and Education Savings Accounts.

School choice is becoming increasingly common and non-controversial. Thirty states and the District of Columbia offer 61 different school choice programs, benefiting nearly 500,000 students. Every year more states consider and pass new programs.

To cite one example, officials in North Carolina each year provide disabled students with a \$7,000 voucher to purchase educational services.¹⁰ The state has also enacted an Educational Saving Account program, providing \$9,000 a year to families with special needs, military families and students in foster care.¹¹

10 "The ABCs of School Choice, 2018 Edition," *EDChoice*, at <https://www.edchoice.org/what-we-do/research/>.

11 "North Carolina General Assembly Expands Educational Opportunities," press release, American Federation for Children, June 22, 2017, at <https://www.federationforchildren.org/north-carolina-expands-educational-opportunities/>.



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A 2017 poll found that 68% of respondents support school choice.¹² School choice support is bipartisan and diverse, with majority support from Latinos (75%), African Americans (72%) and Millennials (75%). A large majority, 83%, of respondents support offering scholarships to children with special learning needs.

Conclusion

The first School Achievement Index in 2010 ranked Washington’s public schools as “Exemplary, (A)” “Very Good, (B)” “Good, (C)” “Fair,(D)” or “Struggling (F),” based on their performance educating students to minimum levels in reading, writing and math. The promise of the Index was the idea that informing the public would lead to consistent improvements that would eliminate the achievement gap, reduce the dropout rate, and increase learning for all students.

On March 15, 2018, eight years after publication of the first Index, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Chris Reykdal and the State Board of Education announced changes which canceled the School Achievement Index. The new Washington School Improvement Framework now categorizes schools by the level of funding school officials believe schools should receive, as requiring “Foundational Supports,” “Support Tier 1,” “Support Tier 2,” or “Support Tier 3.”

This change means that high-performing, average and low-performing schools are no longer identified by this accountability measure.

Instead, the new Framework shifts responsibility for failing to educate students from the schools to the taxpayers.

The downfall of the Index in our state provides important lessons for policymakers. Top down initiatives like the School Achievement Index have failed or been repealed again and again at national and state levels, but school choice programs are making a world of difference to individual families. Policymakers are seeing that allowing families real choice represents actual, real and meaningful accountability for school performance.

¹² “Poll: Public Support for School Choice Remains Strong, Supportive of Federal Movement to Increase School Choice,” American Federation for Children, January 12, 2017, at <https://www.federationforchildren.org/poll-public-support-school-choice-remains-strong-supportive-federal-movement-increase-school-choice/>.