

SEATTLE TEACHER REFUSES TO ADMINISTER WASL TEST TO STUDENTS, CITING MULTIPLE HARMS TEST CAUSES STUDENTS, TEACHERS, SCHOOLS, AND PARENTS

Date: April 20, 2008

Contact: Juanita Doyon, Director, Parent Empowerment Network,
Spanaway, 253/973-1593
Carl Chew, Seattle Teacher, 206-265-1119 email ctchew@earthlink.net

Carl Chew, a 6th grade science teacher at Nathan Eckstein Middle School in the Seattle School District, last week defied federal, state, and district regulations that require teachers to administer the Washington Assessment of Student Learning to students.

"I have let my administration know that I will no longer give the WASL to my students. I have done this because of the personal moral and ethical conviction that the WASL is harmful to students, teachers, schools, and families," wrote Chew in an email to national supporters.

School District response to Mr. Chew's refusal was immediate. After administrative attempts to dissuade his act of civil disobedience had failed, at the start of school on the first day of WASL testing, April 15, Mr. Chew was escorted from the school by the building principal and a district supervisor. Mr. Chew was told to report to the district Science Materials Center where he was put to work preparing student science kits while district administration and attorneys consulted on an appropriate penalty for what was labeled, "gross insubordination."

Mr. Chew attended one hearing at Seattle School District Office, where he was accompanied by a Seattle Education Association representative. On Friday, April 18, Mr. Chew received a letter from Seattle School District Superintendent Maria Goodloe-Johnson which began, "This letter is to inform you that I have determined that there is probable cause to suspend you from April 21, 2008 through May 2, 2008 without pay for your refusal and insubordination to your principal's written direction to administer the WASL at Eckstein Middle School."

During his weeklong struggle with the district over consequences, Mr. Chew was supported by allies throughout the state and nation. "Carl Chew is saying 'No!' to high stakes testing and a resounding 'Yes!' to student needs and to teacher professionalism," stated nationally renowned education activist and author Susan Ohanian of Vermont.

"There are many more teachers who are ready to follow suit. They just need an example and leader," states one Washington teacher.

Organizations and individual allies are now working to replace Mr. Chew's

lost wages. “Though a minor gesture in response to your so much larger gift, I plan to contribute to your salary for the two-weeks the schools aren't paying,” was the response of one colleague from Washington.

Parent Empowerment Network will be presenting Mr. Chew with a check for \$200 to help alleviate his loss of wages and is encouraging organization members to also support Mr. Chew with words of encouragement and monetary contributions. The Vermont Society for the Study of Education and Colorado's Coalition for Better Education have also pledged contributions.

The following is a full statement of Mr. Chew's reasoning for his refusal to administer the WASL.

On April 15 I refused to give the Washington Assessment of Student Learning to my 6th grade students at a Seattle Public Schools middle school. I performed this single act of civil disobedience based on personal moral and ethical grounds, as well as professional duty. I believe that the WASL is destructive to our children, teachers, schools, and parents.

It is important for me to note that my disobedient action was not directed at any individual. I love being a teacher; my students are fantastic; my fellow teachers collaborate with and help me every day in numerous ways; and my school administration has always shown a willingness to listen to and support the teachers. I understand that my action has caused people pain, and I am truly sorry for that, but I could no longer stand idly by as something as wrong as the WASL is perpetrated on our children year after year.

Though my act of civil disobedience was individual, I do not stand alone in my strong beliefs. Any Internet search for high stakes testing will reveal highly regarded educators, distressed parents, and sensitive teachers with a wealth of thoughtful writing and case studies supporting my views.

The WASL is bad for kids.

To my mind the measure of successful childhood is that each child learns about who she or he is and how the world works, gains an assertive and confident self image, and feels safe, well fed, and happy. Schools, along with parents and communities, need to contribute wisely to this goal. Unfortunately, the WASL creates panic, insecurity, low self esteem, and sadness for our children.

- o It is written in the language of White, middle and upper class students, leaving all others behind.
- o It is presented to children in a secretive, cold, sterile, and inhumane fashion.
- o There is no middle ground—children either pass or fail—which leaves them

confused, guilty, and frustrated.

- o Numerous questions on the test are unclear, misleading, or lacking in creativity.
- o It tests a very narrow definition of what educators know children need to become well-rounded human beings.
- o The WASL is given at a prescribed time regardless of a child's emotional or physical health.

The WASL is bad for teachers.

For meager pay teachers are asked to work in extremely challenging situations, keep absurdly long hours, and, when it comes to the WASL, function in an atmosphere of fear.

- o A majority of teachers loath the WASL but feel unable to speak out freely against it due to their fears of negative consequences for doing so.
- o Because administrators are constantly pushing to meet federal guidelines for yearly score improvements, their relationships with teachers can become strained and unpleasant.
- o Administrators and teachers suffer under the knowledge that if they do not achieve improvement goals (measured by WASL passage alone) they can be sent to retraining classes, lose their students to other schools, or have their "failing" school handed over to a private company.
- o Before administering the WASL teachers mandatorily sign a "loyalty" oath promising they will not read any of the test questions.
- o Teachers feel devalued by the amount of time most of them have to devote to test practice and proctoring—upwards of four weeks for actual testing and many more weeks for WASL prep in many cases.
- o Teachers feel used and depressed when, half a year after the test is given, they are presented with dubious WASL results—amateurish and misleading Power Point charts and graphs telling them next to nothing about their students' real knowledge and talents.
- o Teachers' relationships with parents are compromised because they cannot talk freely with them about opting their child out or other WASL concerns.

The WASL is bad for parents and families.

- o Parents have been shut out of this costly process.
- o Most of them are misled by official statements about what the purpose of the WASL is.
- o Many of them do not realize that they have the right to opt their children out of testing with no consequences, though in practice schools have illegally put inappropriate pressure on parents and children who have opted out.
- o Many of them do not realize that teachers are, in many cases, not allowed to discuss any reasons why they might want to opt their child out. (Teachers in California went to court to secure the right to inform parents of their

right to opt their children out of that state's testing.)

- o Like children, parents suffer from the same feelings of guilt and unhappiness when their children fail.
- o Parents are not informed that the test is biased, culturally insensitive and irrelevant, and not a real measure of anything.
- o The WASL graduation requirement has kept thousands of families from knowing whether or not their students will be allowed to take part in graduation ceremonies and celebrations—the culminating reward for 13 years of public school attendance and achievement-- with friends and families.

The WASL is bad for schools.

Even in the best of times purse strings are rarely opened adequately to public education. Where a private school needs to charge \$20,000-\$30,000 to educate a child well, public schools are given a third or less of that for each student. Simply, schools are strapped for cash, many of them struggling each year to fund their needs with an ever shrinking pot of money.

- o While schools are generally underfunded, Washington will spend a projected \$56 million in 2009 to have a private corporation grade WASL tests. These tax dollars are needed right in our schools providing more teachers, smaller classes, tutors, and diverse educational experiences for our students.
- o While the federal government requires that school districts use high stakes testing to qualify for federal dollars, tests are not fully funded by the federal government.
- o WASL is one of the most difficult tests used to fulfill the federal requirements, with one of the highest failure rates.
- o Instead of safe, exciting, and meaningful places for our children to spend half of their waking hours, schools have become WASL or test mills bent on churning out students who are trained to answer state-approved questions in a state-approved manner.

The WASL is just bad.

- o Most, if not all, teachers will agree that assessment is vital. Wise teachers know that assessments which are also learning experiences for students and teachers are the best. The WASL categorically is not a learning experience.
- o I believe that individual students are entitled to their own learning plans, tailored to their own needs, strengths, and interests. Teachers know it is definitely possible to do this in the context of a public school. The WASL categorically treats all children alike and requires that they each fit into the same precise mold, and state-mandated learning plans based on WASL scores fail to recognize individual strengths of students.
- o Passing the WASL does not guarantee success in college, placement in a job, a living wage, or adequate health care.
- o WASL will decrease the high school graduation rate. Thousands of

students who have completed all other requirements and passed all required classes will be denied diplomas because of WASL failure.

- o High-stakes testing has not proven beneficial to students, teachers, schools, or communities.

In the real lives of students, teachers, and parents the WASL is an ongoing disaster.

- o When I was a teacher at Graham Hill Elementary in Seattle, a number of my students received their WASL scores to find that they had “failed”. When I looked at the notices being sent to their parents I saw that each student had come to within just a few points of actually passing and that their scores were well within the grey area, or “margin of error,” for the test. The “test scientists” aren’t sure whether the student passed or failed, yet the school tells the student he or she failed. These students cried when they saw the results.

- o When I first started teaching, Graham Hill could afford Americorps tutors, numerous classroom aides, and had money for fieldtrip busses and ample supplies. By the time I stopped teaching there, Americorps was gone, there were no classroom aides except for parent volunteers, and everything else was in short supply.

- o Teaching and testing during my last year at Graham Hill was challenging. I was on my own in a room with 29 students, 10% did not speak English, 50 % of them spoke another language at home, several of them were homeless, and many of them had severe emotional challenges due to parental pre-natal drug use, violence, and abuse.

- o No one ever asked me or any of the teachers I know whether high stakes testing was a good idea. In fact, we teachers are made to jump through seemingly endless hoops to prove our worthiness to be professional, certificated educators. Public school teachers are responsible for the educational lives of over a million students in Washington State, yet, in the end, no one actually wants to listen to what teachers have to say about what is best for the students in our care.