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Saturday, September 9, 2006

### On WASL, successes and setbacks

New approaches to learning seen as reason for schools' test gains

By PAUL NYHAN  
P-I REPORTER

Van Asselt Elementary was one of the stars of the 2006 WASL, enjoying double-digit gains in reading and writing scores, and it begins with story time.

When Mary Correa read "King of the Playground" to her first-grade class Friday, she did more than flip the pages. Once she finished reading, her class mapped out the beginning, middle and end of the story of Sam the Bully on a white board.

These thinking maps are a linchpin of Van Asselt's education philosophy, and one of the reasons its students did well last year. Essentially, the diagrams help kids learn how they think.

"Getting them to think about their thinking," Correa said during a break in class. "That's the key right there."

The maps and other efforts paid off in the 2005-06 school year because its fourth-graders posted some of the city's most impressive WASL gains -- the passing rate for the math part of the test rose 34 percent from the year before, reading results jumped 16 percent and writing scores rose 18 percent.

To help explain the gains, school leaders highlighted collaboration among teachers, a four-year-old program, Guided Language Acquisition Design, which helps its many students who don't speak English as their native language, and the thinking maps of Correa's story time.

Van Asselt is home to some of the city's most financially strapped students: 77 percent qualify for

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zoom Dan DeLong / P-I

Fifth-graders, clockwise from front, Delannah Collins-Wright, Devante Mitchell, Gartiez Darden and Cheryl Padillo work on a vocabulary test Friday at John Muir Elementary School, which posted impressive

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reduced-price or free lunches. Nineteen WASL gains. languages are spoken.

With such a diverse collection of families, Van Asselt decided to spend a \$25,000 Boeing Co. grant to draw parents into the school four nights a month last year.

On these family nights, parents could lean on teachers and principal Eldoris Turner to learn how to help their kids with homework.

Parents took on a bigger role at another school with impressive WASL gains, South Seattle's John Muir Elementary. It has a large minority student population.

The 300-student school also sponsored parent nights where families could get dinner and help their kids learn.

At John Muir, teachers don't stand at a blackboard and teach everyone the same lesson, said Principal Awnie Thompson. Instead, kids work in small groups on reading and writing projects that mean something to them.

"The whole class is not reading the same book," Thomson said Friday.

Over at Van Asselt, perhaps the most important shift was towards cooperation. Teachers from kindergarten to fifth grade discuss what their kids are learning and what they need to work on.

"So everyone knew where we needed to hit harder next year," Correa said. "I think we have gotten a lot more focused on our teaching."

### WASL Results

The Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) is given each spring to public school students in the fourth, seventh and tenth grades. In 2006, it became mandatory for students to pass the tenth-grade test in order to graduate high school. Students can retake the test up to four times, and later this fall will have the option of completing an alternative to the WASL to be able to graduate.



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