


SNOHOMISH COUNTY



Tribune

 PSRT STD
 U.S. Postage

PAID

 Permit #5
 Snohomish, WA

ECRWSS

Postal Customer

Volume 117, Number 37

Wednesday, September 13, 2006

50¢

Investigation shows WASL design may be flawed

Years of low test scores have educators questioning test's validity

EDITOR'S NOTE: Kristin Kline, who normally writes *The Grumpy Consumer* column, has been investigating the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and its relationship with Robert Carkhuff. This piece is the second in a news investigation and is not a part of Kline's *Grumpy Consumer* column.

By KRISTIN KLINE

In light of recent public outcry over released WASL test scores, the *Tribune* continues to investigate to what extent an unsubstantiated thinking process could be responsible for the scoring quality of the WASL and low student pass rates statewide, particularly in math.

The state's standards de-emphasize traditional math skills, introduces a form of psychotherapy in the cur-

riculum, and makes scoring a subjective test like the WASL impossible because of the difficulty in fairly grading the "thinking" of children, the *Tribune's* investigation has found.

WASL results for 2005-06 show 51 percent of 10th-graders statewide passed the math section, 81.9 percent passed reading, 79.7 percent passed writing and 34.9 percent passed science.

A week after the Tacoma School District decided to go back to a traditional math curriculum by purchasing Saxon Math textbooks to fill "gaps in (the) curriculum," a group of Snohomish County school superintendents banded together to express a lack of confidence in the validity of the WASL test and its scoring procedures, asking for a delay in the release of scores.

Despite the request, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) released the scores Sept. 8.

Tacoma may be the first known school district in the state to publicly question the lack of traditional math skills in the state's math curriculum. To address this problem, the school board held an emergency meeting Aug. 24 and voted to re-install a traditional math curriculum. Newly-hired Superintendent Charles Milligan looked at students' Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) scores and realized "very quickly" that "gaps in (the) curriculum needed to be filled by traditional math."

Milligan said education reform movements are not new concepts and they cannot replace fundamental math skills — incremental develop-

ment of skills through drilling and continual review in order for students to grasp increasingly difficult math concepts.

"For five years our scores have not been where they need to be and it's time for a change," Milligan said. In addition to reverting back to a traditional math curriculum, he decided to implement districtwide math tests every six weeks in order to track progress.

Based on state data released Sept. 8, only one Tacoma high school had more than 50 percent of 10th-graders passing the math WASL, which was Stadium High School with a score of 61.9 percent. The lowest math score (except for the alternative school) was Lincoln High at 16.3 percent passing. In order to graduate, 10th-graders must pass the reading, writ-

ing and math WASL tests.

Mary Waggoner, spokeswoman for the Everett School District, said the group of Snohomish County school superintendents are concerned about the WASL scores and how they affect school accountability. The group, lead by Everett Superintendent Carol Whitehead, asked the OSPI to delay the release of the scores until they were confident they were accurate.

"There are heightened levels of concern statewide as more schools are found not making adequate yearly progress (AYP)," Waggoner said.

AYP refers to the federal government's statewide accountability system mandated by No Child Left Behind that tracks schools' year-to-year performance levels.

See *INVESTIGATION*, page 4

Investigation Continued from page 1

"When we look statewide and there is a problem with the same section on test scores, we begin to ask questions. Are we uncovering a trend? Are we sure the test is valid?" Waggoner said.

The *Tribune* has been investigating that same question, uncovering information which suggests there may be flaws in the basic framework of the state's standards implemented during the state's mid-1990s effort to reform education led by now-state Superintendent Terry Bergeson.

Specifically, the *Tribune* has been investigating the work of self-published OSPI contractor Robert Carkhuff whose thinking system was the basis for the Washington education reform movement and who has a decades-long professional relationship with key OSPI staff members. Documents show he was paid more than \$1 million to restructure Washington state education around his thinking systems.

The *Tribune* is investigating the empirical merit of Carkhuff's thinking system and how much of his framework has been implemented in school curriculum, and if the state standards, which the WASL tests are aligned with are structurally unsound.

Carkhuff's education reform movement is called "The New 3Rs: Skills for the 21st Century" and includes a set of thinking skills that better prepare students for the information age, according to OSPI documents. The thinking process appears to be a form of psychotherapy, which includes moving the mind to a higher-level of cognitive thinking by "relating to phenomena," "representing with phenomena" and "reasoning with phenomena." This has led to the new "thinking and explaining" types

of math and reading curriculum.

Bergeson's office justified awarding a sole-source contract to Carkhuff by describing him as "cited as one of the 100 most important social scientists of all times since his work has significantly defined the fields of counseling, organizational development and social policy." Bergeson's office goes on to state, "Dr. Carkhuff has received wide acclaim both nationally and internationally. ...Three of his books ... have been identified as the most cited books over the past 30 years."

The *Tribune* can find no record of Carkhuff cited in any peer or professional journals or books, outside of his self-published works, in at least the last two decades. He is not mentioned on the Social Science Index, which is used by psychologists and educators to track published papers, cited works, and the who's who in the fields of psychology and psychotherapy.

Don Orlich, professor emeritus at Washington State University who won a national award for his WASL analysis, said in a July 19 *Tribune* article: "All I can say is that Robert Carkhuff is virtually unknown to anyone who is in educational psychology or psychology period."

A *Tribune* investigation into Carkhuff's background found he is a self-published social scientist who was kicked out of a medical school for training orderlies to practice his psychotherapy techniques, and has authored books with three top OSPI staff members whom he has had working relationships with for decades.

Federal grant applications, sole-source contract justifications and letters from the OSPI office and from Carkhuff appear to exaggerate and

misrepresent Carkhuff's credentials, experience and educational expertise.

In one federal grant contract, Bergeson mentions Carkhuff's cognitive thinking system has not been analyzed for use in school, according to documents obtained by the *Tribune*. Bergeson writes, "...brain research ... has provided much important information that is seldom provided in educational practice. ...While this information has not been analyzed, synthesized, and developed for use in student teaching and learning, it will provide critical skills that will prepare students for the requirements of the twenty-first century. It is the knowledge and pedagogy (science of teaching) that will assist Washington students to achieve Goals 3 and 4 of educational reform."

What the *Tribune* can confirm about Carkhuff begins in 1963, when he published a thesis titled "Characteristics Distinguishing Mental Defectives from Normals in Drawing Tasks," which appears to be a test-development process.

After receiving his doctorate in clinical psychology from the State University of New York in Buffalo, Carkhuff worked with influential psychologist Carl Rogers, but they had a falling out. Rogers was famous for developing client-centered psychotherapy.

The only known peer review of Carkhuff's work was in 1973 by Dr. Michael Lambert and Steven DeJulio. They determined his work was invalid, exaggerated, cited unknown sources and was inappropriate. Lambert and DeJulio questioned Carkhuff's theory that a trainer must receive the same helping benefit as the trainee, which is the same concept expressed in Carkhuff's 21st Century Schools teacher-learner process implemented

in "The New 3Rs" movement.

"We must conclude for now it is difficult to 'keep your eye on the donut' because of the size of the hole," Lambert and DeJulio wrote in their peer review about Carkhuff's work. When contacted by the *Tribune* in late August, Lambert, who is a professor at Brigham Young University, said he remembered "very well" the paper he had written on Carkhuff's work. "Carkhuff no longer contributed literature or had work published in the psychology or psychotherapy field so I thought he disappeared. I am not familiar with any of his other work," Lambert said.

After his failed peer review, Carkhuff apparently began self-publishing his own books and it was around this time he came into the first documented contact with future OSPI staff members Andrew Griffin in 1963, Shirley McCune in the '70s and Bergeson in the '80s. Carkhuff was enrolled in some "large state medical school" at one point in the 1960s but was kicked out for training hospital orderlies "for helping roles in the mental health professions," he noted in his 1971 book "The Development of Human Resources: Education, Psychology and Social Change."

At some point he began teaching his theories and developed a long-standing professional relationship with Bergeson, Griffin, McCune and another key WASL designer Catherine Taylor, who is a former OSPI assistant superintendent of assessment. The first three have cited Carkhuff's work, have been listed as co-authors with Carkhuff and are mentioned in Carkhuff studies.

The first documented link the *Tribune* can find between Carkhuff and Bergeson dates to 1982 when she set

out to prove his theories in her 1984 doctoral dissertation from the University of Washington.

Public records show Bergeson contacted Carkhuff in 1994 when she was the executive director of the Commission on Student Learning, established by the state Legislature in 1993. She was appointed to head up the commission and tasked with establishing statewide Essential Academic Learning Requirements or EALRs and to implement an assessment system. The EALRs are the state's curriculum guidelines and have since been re-labeled Grade Level Expectations (GLEs) or more commonly known as standards. Bergeson asked for Carkhuff's help in "pulling these foundation skills together in a powerful way," in a letter written to Carkhuff obtained through public records.

A sole-source justification letter from former OSPI assistant superintendent Michael Bigelow regarding Carkhuff's \$25,000 contract states: "The Carkhuff conceptual framework and materials were used by the state's Commission on Student Learning to plan and implement education reform." Additional documents from the Office of Financial Management detail Carkhuff's duties in education restructuring including "providing consultation on strategies and programs to implement change efforts outlined in Carkhuff's writings and materials."

Marion Hinds, who was a member of the reading subadvisory committee for the Commission on Student Learning, wrote to Bergeson in a 1995 letter obtained through public records expressing her concerns about the design process.

Hinds wrote: "...I have been troubled that speakers/consultants on assess-

P. 12

TO: 12535361074

JUL-26-2004 05:101P FROM:

Investigation Continued from previous page

ment have not produced empirical evidence to support what they are teaching us. ...This is tantamount to having a statewide experiment which I fear is what this whole restructuring endeavor is turning out to be." Hinds wrote that one of her first concerns was that the committee redefined the meaning of reading, which reflected a point of view not supported by research.

At the time, Hinds was a reading teacher.

The *Tribune* contacted Hinds last week and she said during the meetings, information was presented as facts and it didn't occur to members to question the information at first. Hinds said she was "naive" about what was going on.

"I realized an entire education restructuring was taking place and I had serious reservations about the material being presented," she said.

Joe Willhoft, assistant superintendent of assessment, said per Legislative mandate the Commission on Student Learning had the final say in the educational restructuring and assessment design, and as the head of the committee, Bergeson had the final approval on the content of the WASL and the content of the GLEs. Public records show Carkhuff's thinking system was apparently the framework for the educational restructuring and possibly the WASL.

The *Tribune* asked Willhoft in August if it was possible a flawed framework was responsible for the difficulties in the WASL tests. "It's possible," he said. "But that would be for a different department to check."

When asked whether there had been

a statewide study or an investigation done to see if a flawed framework could be the reason for the chronic problems with the WASL tests and scoring, Willhoft said "no." Though each year the WASL is revised, reviewed and changed, Willhoft confirmed to the *Tribune* that the framework has stayed the same and has never been reviewed or revised. The WASL is aligned to state standards, and there is no record that the validity of the state standards have been examined.

When contacted by the *Tribune*, WASL designer Taylor said Carkhuff was only hired for his listening skills. She said she has been a "follower of Carkhuff's work" since the '80s when she was attending college in Kansas. Taylor said listening is an extremely important part of the learning process.

Others have confirmed the WASL originally had a listening section to be given to students verbally.

The state's education reform is spelled out in a 26-page booklet published in March 1999 titled "The New 3Rs: Skills for the 21st Century." According to the booklet, as society becomes more saturated with information, a new way of responding to all this new information is needed. Carkhuff's 3Rs attempt to teach students to process information at a higher cognitive level. Bergeson writes in the booklet that "We won't be surprised by international interest upon the State of Washington for its pioneering efforts in leading the New

3Rs movement."

In that booklet, the WASL is shown in a diagram as being an assessment tool to apparently test how well Carkhuff's framework has been implemented in schools.

In July the *Tribune* tried to contact Carkhuff through his Web site's e-mail, since a phone number was not listed, for an explanation of his theories and did not get a response. Carkhuff's Web sites have since been taken down.

The *Tribune* has submitted numerous questions in writing about Carkhuff's thinking systems, the validity of the WASL and the 3Rs reform movement to OSPI over a six-week period, and has made several attempts to speak directly with Bergeson, McCune and Griffin. All three continue to decline comments or interviews.

Last week a newly-hired OSPI spokeswoman declined to answer the *Tribune's* latest attempt for comments.

The only OSPI employee who answered questions about Carkhuff was assistant superintendent Marty Daybell, who was not employed at OSPI during the time of the educational restructuring. Daybell responded to the *Tribune's* questions via e-mail in late July, one week after the first *Tribune* article was published about Carkhuff's contractual work for the OSPI.

Daybell wrote Carkhuff played no role in the development of the GLEs or the development of the WASL. Daybell wrote the WASL is cited by

The Princeton Review as one of the 10 best state systems, that the quality of the test continues to improve each year, and that Carkhuff is listed as one of the 100 most important social scientists by the Institute for Scientific Information.

Harriet Brand, spokeswoman for The Princeton Review, said it was "ridiculous" they were being used as a positive reference because the information was four years old. For two years only in 2002 and 2003 The Princeton Review analyzed each states' assessment system, in Washington's case that was the WASL. The first year Washington was listed in the top 10 but dropped to 24th the following year.

A highly regarded national and state test expert with 30 years experience, who is familiar with the WASL but would not speak on the record for fear of losing his current position, said the "WASL is a overly engineered, expensive assessment tool that isn't doing what it should be doing." The

WASL includes higher-level thinking responses, which require students to not only know the right answers to questions, but to explain and justify their answers. That, the test expert said, results in a math test that is more aligned with a reading test.

Another test expert who declined to speak on the record said he knew the WASL was a flawed test when he saw how much higher reading scores were than math scores within one school district. He said a valid test will not have such a discrepancy of scores within the same schools.

In Orlich's WASL analysis, he found areas of the state's GLEs and the WASL to be developmentally inappropriate. Out of 182 GLEs in math only around 17 of those are covered on the WASL. He found the GLEs, hence the WASL, to be developmentally inappropriate. He also found the seventh-grade math WASL is actually a ninth-grade test and seventh-grade GLEs are identical in many cases to

See INVESTIGATION, page 11

September 13, 2006

Tribune

Investigation

Continued from page 5

tenth-grade GLEs.

The WASL goes beyond traditional multiple choice in that it asks students to solve a problem, explain and justify a position and write an extended response to a specific directive, even on the math sections. Because of the thinking processes involved in the math, it becomes essentially a reading test as well as a math test, critics argue.

Last year a high-stakes test advocate group called Achieve released a report on the 2003 10th-grade WASL. The report compared the WASL with six

other state tests and found: "Of all the tests examined, the WASL includes the higher percentage of constructed response items," and requires more "cognitively challenging knowledge and skills."

Achieve found the WASL has 30 percent more points devoted to explanation of the answers than the other state tests. And though the math WASL was not as challenging as other state tests, the question format "may be challenging for students because there are not a set of answers to choose from."

Washington's entire 10th-grade WASL derives 59 percent of its points from constructed response items, which was the highest of any state test examined.

Achieve also noted the WASL math section appears to be an easier test than other states but has the highest failure rate. They said this could be because of "a lack of familiarity with the format of the test questions, which may be presenting greater challenges to students than we would expect."

To read the first article in this series, visit www.grumpyconsumer.com.