

The WASL Has No Clothes: A Fairy Tale

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The Emperor's New Clothes is the classic 1837 fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen in which many of us first encountered the idea of *social fear*. By that phrase, I mean that we are all fearful of moving against the current of the mainstream. An excellent high school production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, shows a contrary theme: standing for truth, even unto death; the hero who did was hanged. A similar but more positive theme also arises from my interest in the Lewis and Clark expedition, which reveals the value of going upstream. This is exactly what the intrepid Corps of Discovery did for 2,565 miles as they sought the headwaters of the Missouri River on their quest to find the best route to the mouth of the Columbia (and the fabled Northwest Passage).

I began to see through the reliability problems with the WASL in 2001, but unlike the innocent child who proclaimed publicly, "But he has nothing on!" I acted more like many of the townspeople who knew but feared to openly contradict the political power. I shared my thoughts only among my closest friends and family—never publicly—never professionally.

I first became aware of the problem when, in a large meeting of my peers, one of my colleagues openly questioned the WASL by citing a study that demonstrated problems with its "inter-rater reliability." This reliability problem isn't technical at all. It simply means that there will be a difference in the consistency of how different evaluators will score any given test. Anyone who learned how the WASL free response questions were actually scored naturally raised this question. My colleague pointed out that the margin of error was too large. I later asked him for the study he mentioned. I read it. He was right.

My colleague pointed out that a student who "objectively" passed this high-stakes assessment might actually be scored as failing and that this could happen *within* the *acceptable* margin for scoring error (inter-rater reliability).

Enter my daughter: the heroine of my story is a young girl, just as the hero in *The Emperor's New Clothes* was a little child. I am a proud father, a pride that burst when my daughter became the only one I had ever personally met who scored a perfect 800 on the verbal portion of the SAT during her junior year of high school. She also took the SAT as a 7th grader participating in the Johns Hopkins talent search, and she was honored in a ceremony held at Eastern Washington University for her status as a top verbal scholar in the state based on her performance on this reading, reasoning, and vocabulary test. Months after that honor, she took the reading WASL—she failed.

At least the emperor said she did; however, he also said she passed every other section except the reading, the one area in which she obviously possessed her greatest gifts. Her high school would not routinely admit students to the honors English program unless they passed the reading and writing WASL. We successfully appealed, and in her senior year she was given the school's top

honor for her outstanding achievement in English. She then attended a rigorous private university, the cost of which was offset by her nearly \$58,000 in scholarships.

I am a proud and biased father, but my daughter's record speaks for itself. Yes, she did pass the WASL with flying colors in high school, but that does not negate her 7th grade WASL results that demonstrated the unreliability of that assessment and the problem with all such high stakes tests to this day. The issue is not that she passed it when it really counted; the issue is that many fail when they should have passed! And there is no way to predict who that will happen to.

Another problem is that politicians in power misuse and distort high stakes test data for their own ends. In regard to the WASL, a glaring example is the hidden change in how it was scored between 1999 and 2004. In 1999, a student had to score at the 73rd percentile to pass the WASL. In 2004, when the score was nearing use as a graduation requirement, that number plummeted to the 25th percentile! As a leader in the public school system, I should have known that these changes were taking place. I should have been informed. I wasn't. I found the data on my own when researching the MAP assessment on the NWEA website.

When my son entered high school, we decided to go ahead and have him take the high school WASL because the emperor required it for a diploma. My wife and I consciously decided to ask our son to jump through this hoop that had no value for his future. But the fairy tale fact remains. The emperor has no clothes and high stakes testing doesn't either.