

VETO MESSAGE ON HB 2695-S

March 30, 1996

To the Honorable Speaker and Members,

The House of Representatives of the State of Washington

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am returning herewith, without my approval, Engrossed Substitute House Bill No. 2695 entitled:

"AN ACT Relating to modifying the timelines for the development and implementation of the student assessment system;"

Engrossed Substitute House Bill No. 2695 amends our state's historic 1993 school reform legislation.

The 1993 law, codified as RCW 28A.630.885, established four clear learning goals for all students and a process for creating clear, rigorous academic standards that all students will be required to meet as they move through elementary, middle, and high school. It also called for the creation of a Certificate of Mastery which all high school students would be required to earn before graduating from high school. These reforms were historic because, for the first time in our state's history, they made schools and students accountable for learning -- not just for following regulations or sitting through the required number of classes.

The 1993 legislation also made schools accountable to local communities by requiring all schools to publish the results of statewide assessments showing whether students are meeting the academic standards we have set. This public accountability for learning will allow local communities to recognize and reward schools that excel and to intervene and improve schools where students are not learning as much as they should.

Engrossed Substitute House Bill No. 2695 was originally requested by the Commission on Student Learning to extend deadlines for the development of some academic assessments. That is a supportable and reasonable request. The commission has worked diligently over the past three years, and it makes sense to take as much time as necessary to produce the very clearest standards and assessments. As passed, however, this bill goes beyond the commission's request.

This legislation eliminates state assessments in the early elementary grades in history, geography, civics, health, fitness, and the arts. There are reasonable arguments to be made for this change given the focus on reading, writing, and mathematics in elementary grades. There are also arguments for establishing strong statewide assessments for all subjects for all grade-levels as a way to assess student progress. There is no argument, however, that elementary school teachers need a period of time to adjust to higher standards and to build the foundation for the basic skills that provide the basis for all further learning.

Engrossed Substitute House Bill No. 2695 also eliminates the Certificate of Mastery as a graduation requirement unless and until further legislation is enacted. This is an unwise retreat from the high standards which parents, employers, and the general public expect from our schools. It is totally unacceptable.

The Certificate of Mastery's role as a prerequisite to high

school graduation is what makes education reform meaningful. It says to educators and employers that we will never again give high school diplomas to students who have not mastered the skills and knowledge they will need to succeed in post-secondary education or to succeed in the workplace. It also tells students that what matters is how much they learn -- not how fast or how slow they learn.

The Certificate of Mastery and the essential learning requirements are the fundamental elements of education reform. The essential learning requirements represent what parents, employers, educators, and community members believe children should know and be able to do. Assessments tell students, teachers, parents, and the public how well our students are learning and serve as a measurement of student progress. They serve as consumer information, giving students and parents an evaluation of current performance and letting all of us know how well our schools are doing at educating young people. The requirement that young people achieve the Certificate of Mastery before graduation is what ultimately makes education reform meaningful as a way to raise the achievement levels of all our students, not just those who are the best learners. In our education reform process, no other element has the effect of pushing all students toward these higher levels of achievement.

Existing law does not treat this change in educational practice lightly. Once the Commission on Student Learning has completed its development of essential learning requirements, assessments, and the Certificate of Mastery, the State Board of Education is required to determine whether and when the system is ready for the certificate of mastery to be used as a graduation requirement. The board has treated this challenge with great seriousness. They understand that implementation of the essential learning requirements and assessments must be successful and that student achievement levels must rise before the Certificate of Mastery is required for graduation.

The process of developing educational reform was extensive, involved many people, and took a number of years. Any change in the implementation of education reform must involve broad debate and must not be rushed.

We know that today's students will need a higher level of skill and knowledge than ever before to succeed in the complex fast-changing world of the 21st Century. We also know that Washington State can only prosper if our students are prepared to compete and win in a global economy.

I recognize the value of adjustments to the assessment timeline made in Engrossed Substitute House Bill No. 2695. I am aware that this veto will make it impossible for the Commission on Student Learning to fully comply with the current statutory timeline. I encourage the commission and the legislature to address this specific issue again in the next legislative session.

For these reasons, I have vetoed in Engrossed Substitute House Bill No. 2695 in its entirety.

Respectfully submitted,
Mike Lowry

Governor