

Health Impact Review—2009-03

House Bill 1341: Motivating Students through Incentives to Pursue Postsecondary Education by Eliminating Statewide Assessments as a High School Graduation Requirement

January 8, 2010

I. Executive Summary

The State Board of Health was asked to assess, in collaboration with the Governor's Interagency Council on Health Disparities, the potential impacts of House Bill 1341 introduced during the 2009 Legislative session. If passed, HB 1341 would remove the statewide assessment as a requirement for high school graduation. It also would dedicate any savings realized to conducting a review of incentive programs to motivate students to meet state standards and pursue postsecondary education.

If passage of HB 1341 were to have an impact on health disparities, there would have to be evidence demonstrating the following: (1) that policies requiring students to meet standards on exit exams in order to graduate result in changes in educational attainment; (2) that such policies disproportionately impact students of color; and (3) that educational attainment has significant consequences for health. The most immediate, direct, and widely studied measures of academic attainment for high school students are dropout rates and graduation rates. This review, therefore, focuses on the potential effects of exit exam requirements on dropout rates and high school graduation rates and on health-related consequences of whether a student completes high school and attains a diploma.

While the class of 2008 was the first in Washington to be required to pass the reading and writing portions of the WASL in order to graduate, at the time of this review, there is no available study evaluating the impact of the WASL graduation requirements on dropout rates or graduation rates. Therefore, this review needed to look to the scientific literature to understand whether policies requiring students to meet standards on exit exams have an effect on dropout or graduation rates.

There is ample evidence that high school graduates have better health behaviors, self-reported health, health outcomes, and longer life expectancy than adults with less than a high school education. However, while there is suggestive evidence from the literature that exit exams can have negative impacts on dropout and graduation rates, particularly for students of color, overall research findings are mixed and inconclusive. Further research is needed, particularly in Washington State, to understand the impacts of high school exit exam requirements on dropout and graduation rates. Until that research is completed, however, this review cannot definitively conclude what impact HB 1341 would have on health disparities.