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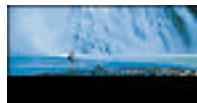
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WASL prep class as much for teachers as students

By Linda Shaw
Seattle Times staff reporter

After lunch, math starts and no books are in sight.

The teachers instead hand out 64 sugar cubes and tell students to use all of them to build a bigger cube, and they hand out other shapes to explore the differences in volume and surface area.

But two of the teachers are learning, too, about the value of hands-on lessons.

WASL Prep, a new summer program in Seattle, is really two programs — test-prep for ninth-graders, training for teachers.

Both have the same goal: help more students pass a test that soon will be crucial for graduation.

As its name implies, WASL Prep is for students headed into 10th grade who need help to pass the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) next spring. The WASL is a high-profile, challenging state test that, in 2008, will become a graduation requirement.

But WASL Prep is also a training ground for teachers in a variety of new methods, aimed especially at struggling students. And it may be a preview for the future of summer school in Seattle.

Now, summer school for high-school students simply offers them the chance to retake a class they've failed, said Lynn Brogan, the Seattle School District's director of curriculum, instruction and assessment

"The research shows simply doing the same thing over for kids doesn't work," she said. "We have to do something different."

Making math more sweet

WASL Prep is clearly different.

In some ways, it looks more like elementary school.

The six classes, intended to be small, are very small. Administrators wanted 20 to 25 students per class, but because recruitment started late, most classes have eight to 10.

Each class has two teachers — three if you count one of the cadre of skilled consultants, mostly retired teachers from New York who work for the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education.

There are no textbooks. Instead, students use green-and-white journals for almost everything — assignments, notes, stories, and reflections on what they've learned.

And they stay in the same class all day with the same teachers, who teach all the subjects — reading, writing, problem-solving and, especially, math.

The emphasis is on math because that's the hardest subject on the WASL for students. Teachers designed WASL Prep's curriculum to cover some of the concepts that give 10th-graders the most trouble on the exam.

And they are working to change students' attitudes about this often-disliked subject.

Students, for example, had to look for math concepts in newspaper stories to help them realize math is everywhere. They also did a lot of hands-on activities, including cutting up cereal boxes and using that cardboard to make smaller, more efficient shapes that hold the same amount of corn flakes.

The program is so different that several parents called, concerned that cutting up cereal boxes or building with sugar cubes didn't sound academic enough.

One of the program's directors, Ryan Richards, explained that WASL Prep is aimed at something much bigger than basic skills.

WASL Prep, in fact, is in sharp contrast to the academic "boot camps" tried in Seattle and other places, which often have a heavy diet of drills.

"It's about opening teachers' minds, really," said Vangie Wise, Seattle project director for the Alliance. "How do they develop student thinking? You develop student thinking by respecting and capitalizing on students' language and culture, including the adolescent culture."

I don't know — yet

Many of the strategies the consultants teach are designed to help students organize thoughts, brainstorm, solve problems or better express themselves in writing.

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"These kids for the most part have heard what they can't do," said Susan Sardy, one of the consultants. "Let them see what they can do."

Some of the approaches appear a little hokey, but they seemed to work. In Room 201, for example, consultant Evelyn Rothstein, a retired teacher from the Bronx, refused to let students say they didn't know an answer.

Instead, they had to say they didn't know *yet*.

Nearly all the students enrolled in WASL Prep had failed at least one class last year. Some had had a tough time with the material. Others had cut too many classes or were kicked out for misbehavior.

But they were recruited because counselors or others thought they could, with a boost, do much better.

There was no disappearing into the back rows in these classes, given the student-teacher ratio of 3 to 1 or better.

In the sugar-cube exercise, if one student in a pair did all the work, a teacher would question the other one.

"How do you express volume?"

"Cubic units."

"Say it again."

Then, a few moments later, he asked again: "How do you express volume?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do know. You told me already."

Surprising breakthroughs

That kind of attention led to breakthroughs teachers found very satisfying.

"I've seen kids experience successes in this classroom that I wouldn't have guessed could do it," says Bruce Drager, a Ballard High School biology teacher. "I can see it's a shock to them."

WASL Prep got its start last winter when Seattle administrators discussed how to improve summer school for high-school students. They'd already made some changes at the elementary- and middle-school levels, but high school remained largely what's known as "credit retrieval." Students who fail a class come to summer school to try it again.

"We decided to forget about credit retrieval and concentrate on building some habits of mind that will help these students be successful," Brogan said. "My intuition, based on a lot of reading and research and best practices, tells me that we have the elements of a winner here both from teacher side or student side."

The district was already working with the National Urban Alliance, hired as part of the Literacy Initiative under which all 3,000 Seattle teachers will receive 72 hours of training in the next three to five years.

Most of the 12 Seattle teachers hired for WASL Prep signed up because they were impressed with that effort and wanted to work more with Alliance consultants.

"I feel like I'm on the ground floor of something big," said teacher Jeff Morgan.

Adapting what they've learned

The teachers can't replicate the WASL Prep approach and personal atmosphere when they're back in 50-minute classes with four to five times as many students.

But they've been thinking about how they'll adapt what they've learned.

Drager plans to use some of the techniques he's learned in his science classes next year. A few years ago, he said he wouldn't have even considered that.

He used to think that his job was to teach biology, and he didn't want to dilute the curriculum by working on students' reading skills.

Now, when he gets to the core part of chapters, he intends to slow down, use exercises such as Read-Talk-Write, in which students read a passage, talk about it briefly with a partner, then spend a few minutes writing about it. After they repeat that cycle a few times, their comprehension soars.

"The reality of it is that it is easily employable and will make a big difference," he said.

So far, the only evidence of success is anecdotal. But the teachers are enthusiastic about what they've seen, even if the gains have been simply a better attitude or perfect attendance.

"The problem of boredom and unchallenging homework is my educational downfall," wrote one student, referring to the regular school year. "Yet this will not be a problem of consequence any longer because I've been having a good experience this summer."

"A lot of it is just seeing participation and motivation," said Seattle teacher Christine Gregory. "They started to like school."

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