



# Identifying and Publicizing Centers of Excellence in Public High Schools

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## Executive Summary

The “Centers of Excellence in Public High Schools” program is a response to the current educational situation in Kitsap County, Washington, a situation the author believes is typical of other areas of our state:

- Education, especially post-secondary education, is as valued by all sectors of Kitsap County as it is in the rest of America.
- County-wide, less than half of Kitsap students can pass the math section of the High School Proficiency Exam.
- The percentage of students meeting statewide learning goals in mathematics peaks in the third grade and goes down every year after that through high school.
- Parents can do nothing that will improve education in their whole schools fast enough to help their school-age kids while they are still in those schools.

But, with the help of the Centers of Excellence program, parents will be able to find those programs in their own schools where students are achieving the best results already, the Centers of Excellence in their own schools. They can then steer their children to programs with a history of achievement. By doing so, parents will be able to quickly change the delivered educational environment for their children from average or even below-average to one challenging the best in Washington.

General data will be collected at a typical high school during the Fall Term of 2011 to support the specific examples of Centers of Excellence confirmed thus far. Then we will need the help of the Education Department of your college, or one like it, to take the “Centers of Excellence in Public High Schools” program statewide.

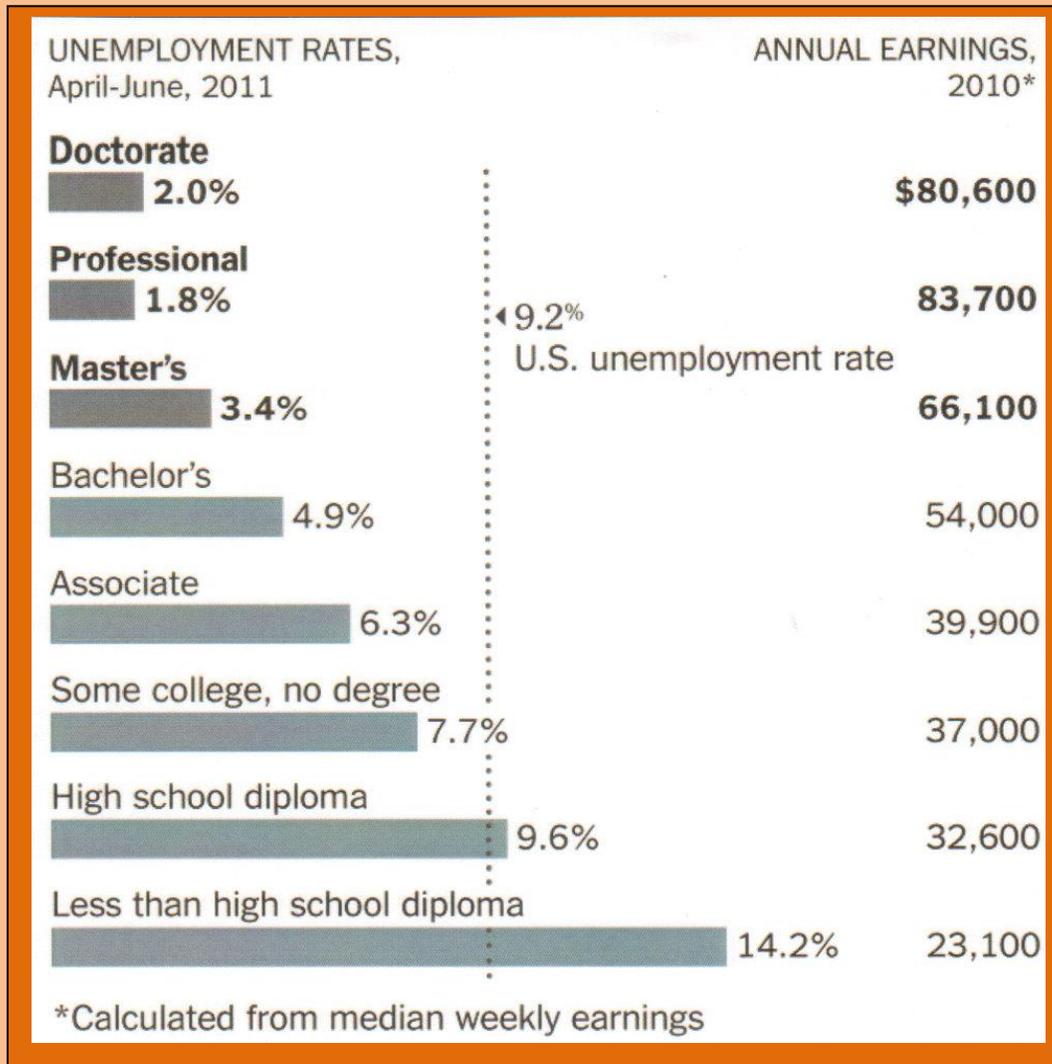


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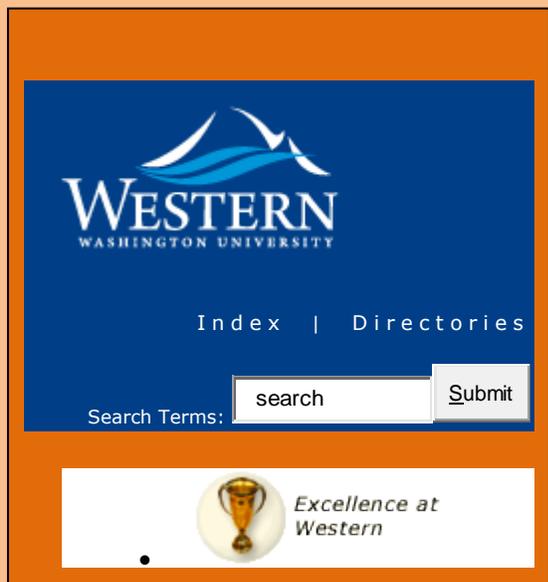
## INTRODUCTION

Almost all parenting everywhere is done by amateurs. No one has a degree in parenting. Parents learn by doing, trying to make the best decisions, and teaching their children to make similar decisions, by sifting through the cloud of alternatives available. Concerning education, the stakes are high, as illustrated in this graph published in the *New York Times* on July 24, 2011. It shows the impact of education on earnings and correlates education level with unemployment.



Typically, children receive their out-of-home educations in public schools, but no school teaches a class to guide parents in sifting through the alternatives available in their schools to find the best choices for their children. Frequently, the answer to the most important question for parents – “What programs are really working for the students in that school right now?” – is either unavailable or hidden from plain view. Working in the higher education environment, this will probably take a college by surprise. Colleges and universities are used to competing for the best

students and faculty – and for funds from potential donors. Colleges understandably – and commendably, in my opinion – trumpet their achievements. The Western Washington University website, <http://www.wwu.edu>, is an example:



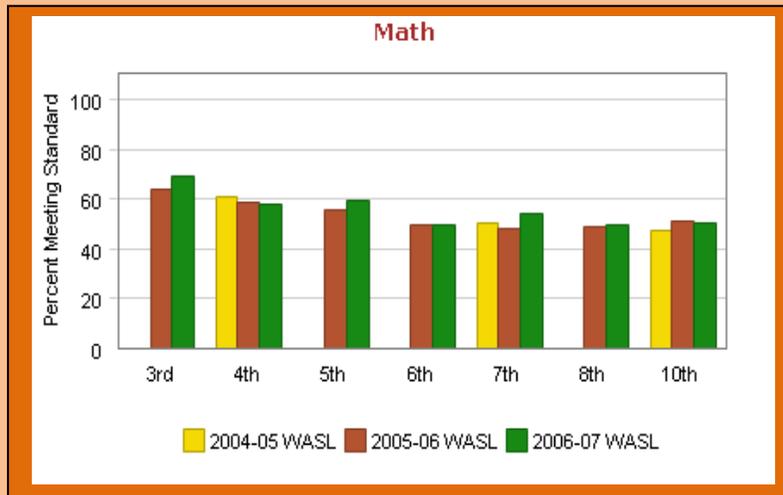
The site-navigation ribbon in the upper third of the homepage of that site leads with an image of a golden trophy labeled “Excellence at Western.” If you click on that trophy you will move to a webpage listing every press release concerning any achievement of the university as a whole, its departments, faculty, students, and staff organized by category. Having the personal experience of visiting that site and also being the parent of two high school students who are potential applicants at Western, the author found this “Excellence” information was helpful and highly appropriate.

Traditionally, public high schools have not seen themselves as competing for their students, and rare is the school that publicizes its achievements. Of course, given the number of alternatives to public high schools that are readily available today, from private schools to on-line programs to home schooling, it is obvious that competition for students exists, and the loss of students to these alternative programs is very expensive to local schools. Lost state funds alone amount to over \$5,000 per student per year. However, from everything the author has seen, that situation has not changed the approach of public high schools at all. Here is an example. Two years ago the author served on the Citizen’s Budget Review Committee in the North Kitsap School District which had about 250 students from the district attending alternative schools. The cost to the district was about \$750,000 annually from lost state revenue, the amount of our expected budgetary shortfall for that year. But the cost of educating an extra 20 students per grade – in classes we were already teaching, using existing material – was very little indeed.

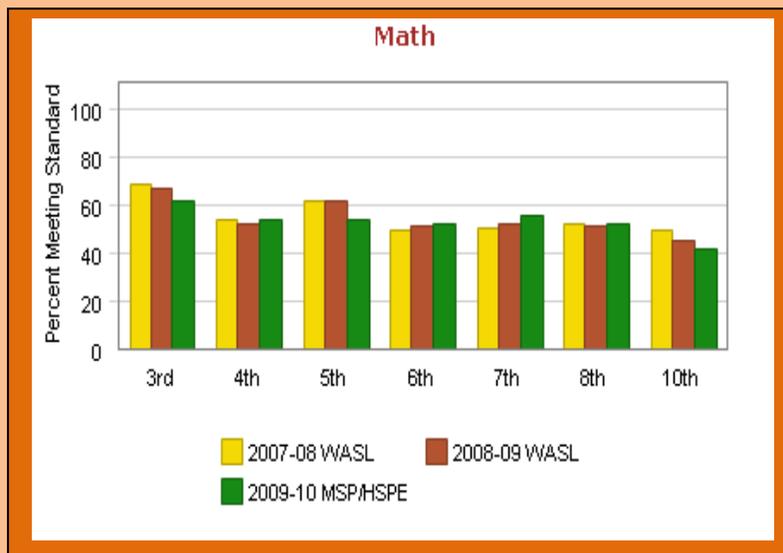
The Centers of Excellence program will help parents by spotlighting over-performing programs in under-performing schools, showing parents the path to an excellent education wherever their children might go to school. In addition to its innate value, it is also easy to explain, simple to implement, and almost cost-free.

## THE NEED

These graphs are from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction's website, and they dramatically show the position and direction of a key aspect of elementary and secondary education in Washington. They show the percentage of students meeting the state learning standard in math from the third through the tenth grades for the last six annual tests, and the news isn't gratifying.



The top graph was published after the 2006-2007 tests. It shows that the percentage of students meeting the state math standard peaked in the third grade and went down every year after that.



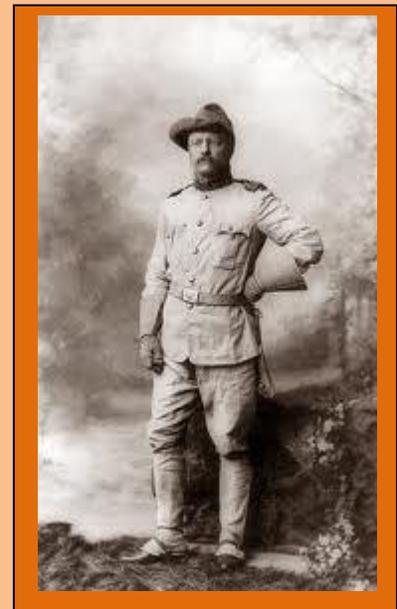
The bottom graph is the most recent one available, and the results are worse. It shows the same drift downward from year to year, but the actual passing rates are much lower. In fact, in the four annual tests from 2006-07 through 2009-10, the passing rates for third graders went down 7.8%, and the rate for tenth graders went down 8.7%, an overall rate of descent of about 2% per

year for each grade. As of the last reported test results, less than half of our students could pass the math section of the High School Proficiency Examination.

Parents of students in public schools who are facing this process have a limited range of options. Most cannot afford to send their children to private middle and high schools, and those schools might not be any better academically than the public schools. In most families both parents are employed outside the home, so home schooling is not an option, and who's to say that these parents will do a superior job in their first attempt as educators? Very few are fortunate enough to be able to move or be transferred to one of the best school districts in the state, and fewer yet can afford the cost of living at that new district when they arrive. Thus, these parents want – and deserve – the best education for their children they can get, but those education will have to be at the public high school in their home town. And the average learning rates inspired by that school will probably be a lot like what was described above.

So, what should these parents do?

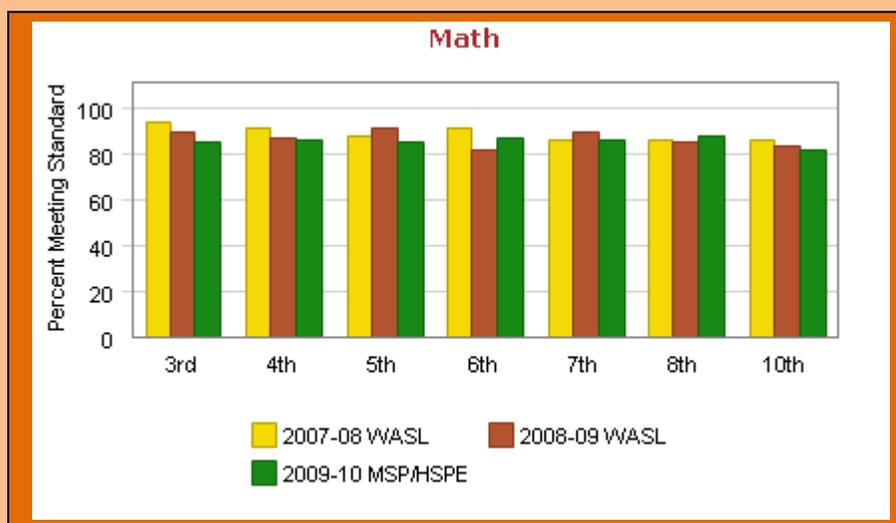
The answer to that question is what the Centers of Excellence program is all about. In essence, it involves finding the programs in public schools that are working well right now so parents can steer their children toward those programs. The Centers of Excellence program takes a page from the book of one of our most successful presidents, Theodore Roosevelt, who said:



**“Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”**

## THE SOLUTION

If we take the time to look, we will find over-performing programs in some of the most under-performing schools, but what criteria should we use to judge their performance? The author will present two examples of over-performing programs in this section and will use data from the top-performing high schools in the state for comparison. There is competition among the best public high schools, and there is some trading of places in various categories each year, but Mercer Island High School is a consistent leader. The Mercer Island School District has the best learning assessment scores in math that the author has found.

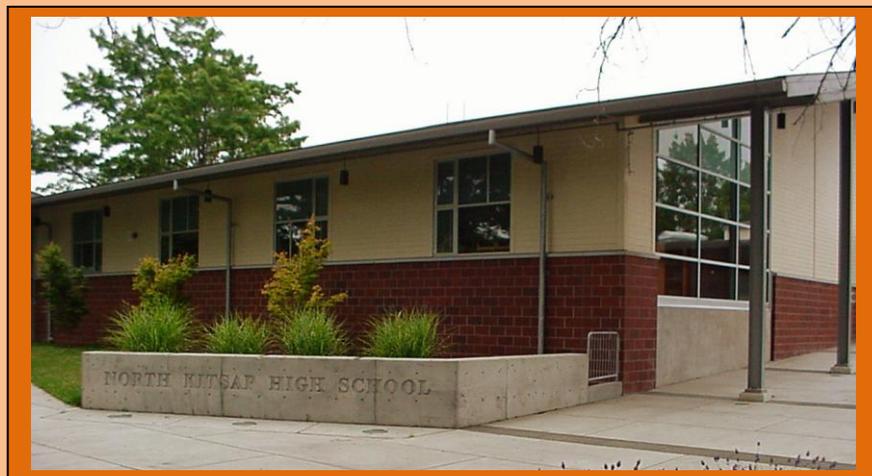


Last year Mercer Island High School had a pass rate on the math section of the High School Proficiency Examination of 81.2%, almost double the state average. Mercer Island also had an on-time graduation rate of 90%, while the state average is 73.5%. Although Skyline High School in Sammamish is almost as good as Mercer Island on the math HSPE, 78.9% last year, and has been recently achieving a fantastic on-time graduation rate, 96.8% last year, Mercer Island High School is still the acknowledged leader, widely known to be Washington’s top high school in academics. If one is speaking to a group of knowledgeable parents and says that the students in a certain local program have better statistics than Mercer Island, jaws will drop, but that will not be the case if a comparison is made to Skyline. Thus, the author will use Mercer Island High School as the “Gold Standard.”

So far, the author has found two programs in Kitsap County high schools that meet the Gold Standard, and each is truly a Center of Excellence in its school. While reading about these two programs, recall the reasoning presented above in the Executive Summary where it was said that by steering their children into these centers, “parents will be able to quickly change the delivered educational environment for their children from average or even below-average to one challenging the best in Washington.” Each of these programs does not just meet the Gold Standard, each clearly and emphatically exceeds that standard today.



Our first Center of Excellence is in Bremerton High School, a school with scores that are well below the state averages. Only 29.7% pass the math HSPE, versus 41.7% for the state; and the on-time graduation rate is 65.5%, versus the state average of 73.5%. However, the Avid Program at Bremerton High, a program targeted at the children of non-college households who want to be the first people in their families to graduate from college, exceeds the Gold Standard. Even though the students in the Avid Program enter high school with mid-range scores and grades, they all pass the HSPE, all graduate on time, and each goes on to college.



Our second Center of Excellence is in Poulsbo in North Kitsap High School, a school with upper mid-range scores. 47.1% pass the math HSPE, and 81.5% graduate on time. However, student performance among the 140 students in the North Kitsap Band Program again exceeds the Gold Standard with all students passing the HSPE and all students graduating on time. Additionally, band members maintain an average GPA of 3.5, they participate in a broad range of other activities with most being athletes, and 95% go on to college with two-thirds receiving merit-based scholarships.

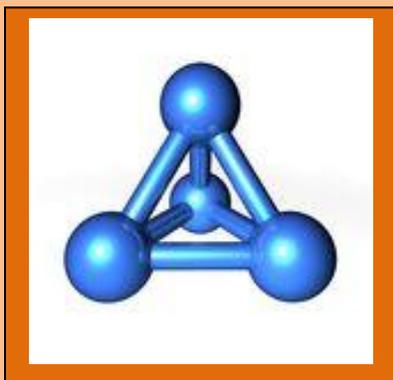
## THE PLAN

The two Centers of Excellence examined so far were ones the author found in public high schools in Kitsap County, Washington, while working on other volunteer projects. The author's goal for the Fall Term of 2011 is to find a public high school that is willing to get behind the Circles of Excellence idea and to encourage its staff and faculty to provide simple data about the accomplishments of students participating in programs and activities within the school. Those data will then be analyzed to determine their levels and be compared to established standards.

Bremerton's Avid Program and North Kitsap's Band Program were compared to the Gold Standard, Mercer Island High School. Each of them clearly exceeded that standard. In fact, one might say that each of them "blew Mercer into the weeds," and that level of achievement should be a point of justifiable pride for everyone participating in those programs. But that level of achievement cannot be expected to be common, nor does it need to be. Parents of children who attend or expect to attend that school will need to know which programs exceed the averages at that school. So, the author expects at this point to arrange the results in bronze, silver, and gold levels. As examples, the bronze level might be those programs whose students exceed the school's performance averages by one-third, the silver level by two-thirds, and the gold level being those programs meeting or exceeding the Mercer Island averages.

No one starts such a study truly "blind." Instead, each person beginning an endeavor like that starts with an expectation of what the results will be. The author will not shape or pre-judge the facts, but he has spent a number of years as a volunteer in public schools, and he will be very surprised if the results do not look a lot like this:

- The "study" high school will probably have many programs that comfortably exceed the school's averages, if we include all programs found to be in the bronze, silver, and gold levels discussed above.
- These programs will reflect a broad array of academic, athletic, art, performance, technical, and vocational programs and activities.
- These programs and activities will share students, with these Centers of Excellence forming a Community of Excellence, looking a lot like this diagram of the atoms forming a molecule.



- The ultimate value of the study will be the list of successful programs, the ones fostering excellence, which will be made available to parents. That list will help them change the lives of their children; and, even if the Centers of Excellence program goes no further, the impact that it will make right then will make it well worth the effort.

But the Centers of Excellence program can have a broader impact than that.

## CONCLUSION

Centers of Excellence in Public High Schools could prove to be one the those rare programs that has innate value while being easy to explain, simple to implement, and almost cost-free. It was designed to help parents by listing positive activities and programs already in their schools. To take it beyond the boundaries of Kitsap County, Washington, will require the assistance of an organization with a broader reach than the author's.

And, that's where your organization comes in. The author believes your organization has that reach, and he invites its participation in this endeavor with the goal of taking this program statewide.

## SOURCES

**Photographs of High Schools** Pages 1, 2, 3, and 9  
By the author, cropped and re-touched using Hewlett-Packard Photosmart and Picnik.com software.

**Graph Correlating Education, Income, et cetera** Page 4  
By the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, as printed in the *New York Times* on July 24, 2011 and reprinted on their website at:  
[http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2011/07/24/education/edlife/20110724\\_roi2\\_graphic.html?ref=edlife](http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2011/07/24/education/edlife/20110724_roi2_graphic.html?ref=edlife)

**Western Washington University “Excellence” Image** Page 5  
By Western Washington University, <http://www.wwu.edu/>

**Graphs Showing Statewide Math WASL/HSPE Scores** Page 6  
By the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction’s website  
Upper graph:  
<http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/summary.aspx?groupLevel=District&schoolId=1&reportLevel=State&orgLinkId=1224&yrs=2006-07&year=2006-07>  
Lower graph:  
<http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/summary.aspx?groupLevel=District&schoolId=1&reportLevel=State&orgLinkId=1224&yrs=2009-10&year=2009-10>

**Photograph of President Theodore Roosevelt** Page 7  
<http://www.google.com/search?q=theodore+roosevelt+pictures&sourceid=ie7&rls=com.microsoft:en-US&ie=utf8&oe=utf8>

**Quote from President Roosevelt** Page 7  
[http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/t/theodore\\_roosevelt.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/t/theodore_roosevelt.html)

**Graph Showing Math HSPE Scores for Mercer IslandHS** Page 8  
By the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction’s website  
<http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/summary.aspx?groupLevel=District&schoolId=103&reportLevel=District&orgLinkId=1224&yrs=&year=2009-10>

**Graphic Showing Blue Molecular Diagram** Page 10  
<http://www.canstockphoto.com/illustration/covalent.html>