



Left to Chance: Student Outcomes in Seattle Public Schools from 1990 to 2024

April 24, 2025 AI Summary

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Introduction: Arik Korman, CEO of League of Education Voters, opens the webinar by introducing the topic and the guest speaker, Vivian van Gelder, Director of Policy and Research at the Southeast Seattle Education Coalition (SESEC). The webinar explores [student outcomes in Seattle Public Schools from 1990 to 2024](#), highlighting the evolution of educational improvement and the impact of decentralization.

Setting the Stage: Vivian Van Gilder begins by taking the audience back to the 1970s, a time of economic decline and stagflation in the United States. Amidst this backdrop, the narrative of excessive government regulation emerged, leading to Ronald Reagan's presidency and his promises to deregulate the economy, including the education sector. Reagan's Secretary of Education, Terrell H. Bell, commissioned the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which published the report "A Nation at Risk" in 1983. This report criticized the state of public education and sparked a nationwide bipartisan education reform movement.

The Birth of Education Reform: The education reform movement had two major waves. The first wave focused on creating rigorous learning standards and standardized testing, accompanied by higher expectations for aspiring teachers. In Washington State, this was expressed through the Education Reform Act of 1993 and the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) test. The second wave aimed at deep structural reforms, including the professionalization of teaching and decentralization. This involved moving decision-making from centralized bureaucracies to individual schools, a concept known as school-based management or site-based decision-making.

Seattle's Decentralization Experiment: Seattle Public Schools embarked on its own journey of decentralization in the 1990s. The Cresap Report highlighted the district's challenges, including dwindling public confidence, financial precariousness, and disproportionality in academic performance among racial and ethnic groups. This led to a consensus on the need for reform. In 1995, retired Army Major General John Henry Stanford was hired as superintendent. Stanford's vision was to run schools like businesses, with

principals acting as CEOs. His reforms included site-based management, student-based budgeting, and open school choice, creating a competitive environment among schools.

Challenges and Consequences: Despite initial optimism, Stanford's reforms led to unintended consequences. By 2002, a significant budget deficit emerged, and audits revealed that decentralization had fragmented the system, negatively impacting vulnerable students. The district had become a collection of 100+ separate school systems, leaving student learning outcomes to chance. The Moss Adams audit firm found that empowering schools to make their own decisions led to a loss of budgetary control and disconnected administrative processes.

Undoing the Reforms: Between 2007 and 2009, efforts were made to undo Stanford's reforms. Site-based budgeting was removed, curriculum was standardized, and the student assignment plan reverted to neighborhood schools. However, the remnants of site-based management persisted, causing ongoing challenges. The Supreme Court's decision in 2007 to strike down the racial tiebreaker used for school enrollment led to the redesign of the student assignment plan, further moving away from open school choice.

The Shift in Accountability: The webinar discusses the shift from punitive accountability to a focus on racial equity and social justice. The Every Student Succeeds Act replaced No Child Left Behind, marking a new era in education reform. Seattle Public Schools adopted Policy 0030, ensuring educational and racial equity. This policy represented a pivot towards addressing broader social impacts on student success, moving away from solely school-related factors.

Current Struggles and Recommendations: Vivian highlights the ongoing struggles with implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) across Seattle Public Schools. Despite efforts, inconsistencies remain, and progress is dependent on individual willingness to participate. SESEC recommends reassessing site-based management and establishing an effective accountability structure. The Novak Educational Consulting Group's 2024 report and Dr. Rocky Torres-Morales' observations in 2025 underscore the need for consistent implementation and support.

Conclusion: The story of Seattle Public Schools is a reflection of the broader national education reform movement. While the journey has been fraught with challenges, understanding what doesn't work is as important as knowing what does. The future of public education holds promise, with a focus on equity, justice, and sustainable improvement.