K12 ACADEMICS — STATE EDUCATION SERIES



Washington
Education Guide

A complete profile — schools, testing, graduation, accountability, school choice, teacher certification & financial aid, each in depth.

K12 ACADEMICS

Find Your Community

2026 EDITION

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Everything about school in Washington.

This guide profiles **Washington**'s education system in seven parts, each a two-page deep dive with the key facts, plain-English explanations, and a link to the full, regularly-updated guide online. From K12 Academics, the world's largest education resource, online since 2004.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Education Overview · State Testing · Graduation Requirements · Accountability & Report Cards · School Choice · Teacher Certification · Financial Aid

SEARCH 200+ DIRECTORIES

K-12 Schools · Colleges & Universities · Vendors · Summer Programs · International Programs · Performers

Education Overview

EDUCATION IN WASHINGTON

Washington educates roughly 1.1 million public K–12 students across about 295 school districts , overseen by the elected Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) . Enrollment is concentrated in the Puget Sound region. Washington's approach has some notable features. Its school...

WHO MUST ATTEND SCHOOL

- **Start age** — 8 (6–7 if already enrolled)
- **End of compulsory age** — 18 (or graduation)
- **Districts** — ~295 school districts
- **Satisfying it** — Public, approved private, or home-based instruction

PRE-K IN WASHINGTON

Washington's state preschool is the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) — free, high-quality preschool for eligible (largely at-risk and income-qualified) 3- and 4-year-olds. Under the Fair Start for Kids Act , Washington is moving to make ECEAP an entitlement — guaranteeing a slot for every eligible child (phasing...

AT A GLANCE

Compulsory	Ages 8–18
Districts	~295
Testing	Smarter Balanced
Diploma	24 cr + pathway
Choice	Running Start

DISTRICTS & CHARTERS

Washington's largest districts include Seattle , Spokane , Tacoma , Kent , Lake Washington , and Federal Way . Washington's charter-school sector is small and has been legally contested : voters approved charters in 2012, the state Supreme Court struck down the original funding in 2015, and the legislature re-authorized them in 2016....

PRIVATE & INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN WASHINGTON

- **Independent schools** — Nonprofit, board-governed, tuition-funded schools (such as Lakeside, Seattle Academy, The Bush School, University Prep, and Annie Wright) —...
- **Catholic & parochial schools** — Archdiocese of Seattle schools and other church-affiliated schools
- **Other religious schools** — Christian, Lutheran, Jewish, and more
- **Specialty schools** — Montessori, Waldorf, and schools for specific learning needs

READ WASHINGTON'S FULL EDUCATION OVERVIEW GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

State Testing

WHAT YOUR STATE TESTS

Washington uses the Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA) for ELA and math in grades 3–8 and grade 10, and the WCAS (Washington Comprehensive Assessment of Science) in grades 5, 8, and 11. All are run by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). For graduation, Washington uses a menu of graduation pathways rather than a...

WHICH TESTS, WHICH GRADES

- **Smarter Balanced — ELA & Math** — Grades 3–8 and grade 10 (computer-adaptive, with a performance task)
- **WCAS (Science)** — Grades 5, 8, and 11
- **WA-AIM** — Alternate assessment for eligible students; WIDA ACCESS for multilingual learners

FORMAT & SUBJECTS

The Smarter Balanced tests are computer-adaptive and include a performance task; WCAS is a computer-based science test. Item types range from selected response to constructed response and interactive tasks.

IS PASSING REQUIRED TO GRADUATE?

Yes — but flexibly. Students must meet a graduation pathway in ELA and math. Options include meeting the SBA standard, qualifying SAT/ACT scores, AP/IB exam scores, dual-credit college courses, the ASVAB (armed services test), a CTE course sequence , or a transition course. This lets students demonstrate readiness in the way that fits...

AT A GLANCE

ELA/Math	**Smarter Balanced**
Grades	**3–8 and 10**
Science	**WCAS gr 5, 8, 11**
High school	**Graduation pathways**
Grad requirement?	**Yes — meet a pathway**
Format	**Computer-adaptive**

HOW IT 'S SCORED

SBA reports four levels (1–4), with Level 3+ meeting standard — Level 3 is the bar for the SBA graduation pathway. WCAS reports science achievement levels.

TESTING WINDOWS

SBA and WCAS are given in a spring window set by each district. Exact dates vary — check with your school.

HOW TO PREPARE

- **Practice & training tests** — OSPI provides free online practice and training tests for the computer-adaptive format
- **Pick your pathway** — Know which graduation pathway you're pursuing and prepare for that measure
- **Apply skills** — Smarter Balanced rewards reasoning and applying skills across standards

READ WASHINGTON'S FULL STATE TESTING GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Graduation Requirements

AT A GLANCE

Washington requires 24 credits (the Career and College Ready framework), a High School and Beyond Plan , and completion of a graduation pathway — but there's no single exit exam : students choose from several pathway options.

CREDIT & COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The 24-credit requirement includes 4 English, 3 math, 3 science, 3 social studies, 2 health/PE, 1 arts, 1 CTE, 2 world language (or personalized pathway), and electives — with some flexibility built in.

TESTING TO GRADUATE

No single exit exam. Students meet a graduation pathway by choosing one of several options: the Smarter Balanced state tests, the SAT/ACT, an AP/IB exam, dual credit, the ASVAB, a CTE sequence, or a transition course. This flexibility lets students show readiness in different ways.

DIPLOMA TYPES & HONORS

Washington issues a standard diploma, with the Seal of Biliteracy available. The High School and Beyond Plan guides each student's course choices toward their goals.

OTHER REQUIREMENTS

Every student completes a High School and Beyond Plan mapping their path to graduation and beyond. Confirm details with your district.

AT A GLANCE	
Credits	**24 (Career & College Ready)**
Assessment	**Graduation pathway (choose one)**
Plan	**High School and Beyond Plan**
Not a single	**Exit exam**
Confirm with	**Your district**

ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS

The multiple graduation pathway options (tests, dual credit, CTE, military, transition course) are Washington's family-friendly way to let students demonstrate readiness.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **How many credits does Washington require?** — The state sets a minimum, but your district may require more — confirm locally.
- **Does Washington require a test to graduate?** — Not a single exit exam — students complete one of several graduation pathway options.
- **Are there different diploma types?** — Yes — plus honors designations and seals; see the diplomas section.
- **What if my student is behind on credits?** — Talk to the counselor about credit recovery and alternative pathways.
- **Where do I confirm the exact requirements?** — Your school counselor, district, and the state department of education.

READ WASHINGTON'S FULL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Accountability & Report Cards

AT A GLANCE

Washington uses the Washington School Improvement Framework (WSIF) — an index (roughly a 1–10 scale) that identifies schools for support — along with a detailed State Report Card , rather than a letter grade or stars.

HOW THIS STATE RATES SCHOOLS

The WSIF combines proficiency, growth, graduation, English-learner progress, and a school-quality measure (like regular attendance) into an index used to identify schools for support (CSI/TSI). The State Report Card shows the full data. Read the components and trend , not just the index.

WHAT GETS MEASURED

- **Academic achievement** — How students score on state tests (proficiency in reading/ELA and math)
- **Academic growth / progress** — How much students improve year to year — not just where they land
- **Graduation rate** — For high schools (the 4-year cohort rate)
- **English-learner progress** — How English learners are progressing toward proficiency
- **School quality / student success** — An extra indicator — often attendance/chronic absenteeism, college/career readiness, or similar

FINDING & READING THE REPORT CARD

Look up any school on the Washington State Report Card . Review the WSIF components (especially growth) and the trend.



AT A GLANCE	
Format	WA School Improvement Framework
Scale	1–10 Index
Also	State Report Card
Tool	WA Report Card
Look up at	washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k...

HOW FAMILIES SHOULD USE RATINGS

- **Read it in context** — A school's score reflects its students' circumstances too, not only its quality
- **Look at growth, not just scores** — Growth shows how much a school moves students — often more telling than raw proficiency
- **Check the trend** — Is the school improving over time?
- **Look past the summary** — Dig into the underlying data (subgroups, attendance, readiness)
- **Then visit** — Data raises questions; a visit answers them (see our guide on evaluating a school)

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **How does Washington rate schools?** — Washington uses the WSIF (a ~1–10 index) plus the State Report Card — not a letter grade or stars.
- **What do the ratings measure?** — Test scores, growth, graduation rate, English-learner progress, and a school-quality indicator.
- **Where do I look up my school?** — On the state's official report-card portal (see below).
- **Should I choose a school by its rating alone?** — No — use it as a starting point, weigh growth and context, and visit.
- **What are CSI and TSI?** — Federal labels for schools flagged for Comprehensive or Targeted Support and Improvement.

READ WASHINGTON'S FULL ACCOUNTABILITY & REPORT CARDS GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

School Choice

AT A GLANCE

Washington does not have a private-school-choice program (no ESA, voucher, or tax-credit scholarship). It offers public choice through open enrollment and a small (and legally contested) charter-school sector.

THIS STATE'S CHOICE PROGRAMS

There is no ESA, voucher, or tax-credit scholarship for private school in Washington. Families seeking a private school pay tuition (with financial aid often available).

PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE, TOO

- **Open enrollment / transfers** — Attend a public school outside your zone, where allowed (see our finding-your-school guide)
- **Charter schools** — Tuition-free public schools of choice (where available)
- **Magnet schools** — Tuition-free public schools with a specialized focus
- **Homeschooling** — Legal in all 50 states (rules vary)

LEGAL & LEGISLATIVE STATUS

Private-choice proposals have not been enacted in Washington. Confirm the current status if you've heard of a new proposal.

AT A GLANCE	
Private choice?	**No statewide program**
Public choice	**Open enrollment + limited charte…**
Charters	**A small, legally contested secto…**
Homeschool	**Legal (with state rules)**
Confirm with	**Your district**

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **Does Washington have a private-school-choice program?** — No — Washington has no private program, but offers public open enrollment and limited charters.
- **What's the difference between an ESA and a voucher?** — A voucher pays a private school directly; an ESA is a flexible parent-managed account for many approved expenses.
- **What is a tax-credit scholarship?** — Donors get a tax credit for giving to organizations that fund private-school scholarships.
- **Is there public school choice too?** — Yes — open enrollment, charters, and magnets (plus homeschooling).
- **Where do I confirm the details?** — On the official state program site (see below).

READ WASHINGTON'S FULL SCHOOL CHOICE GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

Teacher Certification

HOW LICENSURE WORKS HERE

Washington certifies teachers through the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and the Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB) . You complete an approved program, pass the required exams, and earn a Residency Certificate , later a Professional Certificate .

WHICH TESTS THIS STATE USES

- **WEST-B** — Basic skills — though alternatives (like SAT/ACT) can satisfy it
- **WEST-E / NES** — Subject-knowledge test(s) for your endorsement area
- **edTPA** — A teaching performance assessment completed during student teaching (confirm current status)

WHAT YOU NEED TO GET LICENSED

- **A bachelor's degree** — From an accredited college or university
- **A state-approved teacher-preparation program** — Completed at a college or through an approved alternative route
- **Student teaching / clinical practice** — Supervised classroom experience
- **Pass the required exams** — See the exams section above
- **A background check** — Fingerprint-based criminal background check
- **Apply to the state** — Submit your application and documents to the licensing agency



AT A GLANCE	
Agency	OSPI / Prof. Educator Standards...
Basic skills	WEST-B (or alternatives)
Subject	WEST-E / NES
Performance	edTPA

OTHER PATHS INTO TEACHING

Most states offer alternative routes for career-changers and those with a degree in another field. In Washington, these typically let you start teaching while completing licensure requirements — through district or university alternative-certification programs, residencies, or emergency/provisional permits. Requirements (and the exams)...

RECIPROCITY & OUT-OF-STATE LICENSES

- **Interstate agreements** — Most states participate in the NASDTEC Interstate Agreement, which eases (but doesn't guarantee) recognition of an out-of-state license
- **You may still owe exams** — States often require you to meet their own testing (or coursework) requirements, sometimes within a grace period
- **Check both states** — Confirm the specific steps with Washingtons agency and your current state

READ WASHINGTON'S FULL TEACHER CERTIFICATION GUIDE
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Financial Aid

THE STATE AID PICTURE

Washington runs one of the country's most generous state aid programs — the Washington College Grant — through the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) . Undocumented and other students not eligible for federal aid apply via the Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA) .

NEED-BASED STATE GRANTS

- **Washington College Grant (WA Grant)** — A large, income-based grant that can cover full tuition at the lowest income levels (and partial aid well into the middle class) at colleges and...
- **College Bound Scholarship** — For income-eligible students who pledge in middle school and meet the requirements — covers tuition (at public rates) and a book allowance.

PROMISE & FREE-COLLEGE PROGRAMS

Passport to Careers supports students who experienced foster care or homelessness with aid and services toward college or apprenticeship.

COLLEGE SAVINGS (529 PLAN)

Washington offers the GET prepaid tuition plan and the DreamAhead 529 investment plan.

APPLYING & THE STATE AGENCY

- **File the FAFSA early** — It's the trigger for state grants and many scholarships
- **Register with WSAC** — Create the state agency's student account to track and claim awards
- **Confirm your details** — Verify residency, GPA, and enrollment as required
- **Meet any extra requirements** — Some programs need a separate form, GPA, or service commitment
- **Reapply every year** — State aid is awarded annually

AT A GLANCE	
Flagship	**Washington College Grant**
Middle-school pledge	**College Bound Scholarship**
Foster/homeless youth	**Passport to Careers**
529 plan	**GET / DreamAhead**
Agency	**WSAC**
Apply by	**FAFSA or WASFA**

DEADLINES & TIMING

State deadlines are typically much earlier than the federal FAFSA deadline , and some aid is first-come, first-served until funds run out. File the FAFSA as soon as it opens (in the fall) and confirm the state's specific priority date.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **How do I get Washington state aid?** — File the FAFSA (and any state form) by the deadline; WSAC administers the programs.
- **Is it need-based or merit?** — Both — Washington offers need-based grants and merit scholarships.
- **Are the deadlines earlier than federal?** — Usually yes — file early, as some aid is first-come.
- **Can I use it out of state?** — Most Washington aid is for in-state schools; check each program.
- **Does this list private scholarships?** — No — this guide covers official state programs only.

READ WASHINGTON'S FULL FINANCIAL AID GUIDE
tools.k12academics.com →

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