

Washington's Education Options and Learning Pathways: A Guide for Families

OLYMPIA, WA, USA, January 24, 2023 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Public education in this country originated with the belief that all children, from all backgrounds, have the right to equitable learning opportunities.

In Washington, educators and education leaders are committing to that vision by catering instruction to each individual student and their needs.



"There's a vast need out there for options for students because students are different," said Rhett Nelson, Director of Learning Options for the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). "No student is the same. Their learning needs are different. Their goals are different."

Washington schools offer many formats in which students can access instruction, as well as preparation to pursue many pathways after high school graduation. Below, OSPI provides a breakdown of all the options available for students and their families to consider.

Education Options

Public education allows for students to access instruction and school services in a range of formats, from attending class in a traditional school building to participating in online learning outside of typical school hours.

"Our regulations are really around school calendar, course content, learning standards — all of those things that can be implemented in a huge variety of ways," Nelson said.

Nelson added that a great first step for families is to contact their local school district to learn which instructional options are available and how to access them.

“Our state is very locally controlled, so school districts have a lot of authority about what kind of programming they’re offering and how they’re delivering instruction,” he said.

Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) programs are offered by hundreds of schools across the state. These programs create the flexibility that allows students to participate in instruction independently from the classroom or the traditional class schedule, for part or all of their instruction. They can take the form of online programming, where students attend class mostly online; site-based options, in which students attend class in person at a designated location; and remote options, which allow students to engage in projects away from the traditional school setting.

ALE courses may serve individual students or multiple students, and can be designed to encourage high levels of partnership between the school and a student’s family. School districts have the flexibility to create ALE courses that best respond to the needs of their students.

ALE programs have long met the needs of students who benefit from non-traditional schedules — for example, students who have jobs or responsibilities to care for younger siblings. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, these programs also became appealing to families hesitant to return to in-person learning.

There’s also a broader range of Online Learning models that may or may not be categorized as ALE programs. Online Learning can take the form of an online course or an online school program. Online courses are those in which more than 50% of the content is delivered electronically and more than 50% of the teaching is conducted remotely from the student. Online school programs are when more than 50% of a student’s schedule is made up of online courses.

Students can participate in Online Learning either part-time or full-time. Families can find out [what Online Learning options are available to them on the OSPI website.](#)

Another model, called Continuous Learning, offers online synchronous instruction to students in a way that mimics the in-person experience. Students are connected to their class on a regular schedule with limited asynchronous learning time. Synchronous instruction is when the student and their teacher are online at the same time; asynchronous instruction allows the student to work independently.

Continuous Learning was initially developed in response to the pandemic to serve students when they can’t access in-person learning because of health and safety concerns. Whereas ALE programs are not required to provide synchronous instruction, school districts determine the synchronous online schedule for Continuous Learning programs, with no more than 30% of daily instructional time devoted to asynchronous learning.

Aside from these options that offer instruction in different formats and/or during different

schedules, Washington is also home to traditional public schools that use nontraditional instructional approaches. These include Montessori methods, in which students engage in self-directed activity instead of direct instruction; magnet schools, which focus on specific content areas; and mastery-based learning, where instruction takes place by engaging students in projects that aim to solve real-world problems.

Regardless of the format, all public education options must comply with the same minimum rules and regulations.

“All public education options meet the rigorous needs of public education,” Nelson said. “It needs to be equitable; it needs to be accessible; it needs to be hitting all those learning standards. It has the same goals across public education.”

For families who can't find a desired option in their local school district, or families with certain transportation needs, Washington also offers nonresident student transfers. Both the school district where the student resides and the nonresident school district must approve the transfer.

Learning Pathways

As students consider what they'll pursue after high school graduation, Washington's schools offer multiple opportunities for students to gain experience that will support those goals and interests.

For students interested in learning technical skills that can give them a jumpstart on their career, Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs may be a good fit. These include options like skill centers, which are regional service centers that provide instruction in specialized programs ranging from early childhood education to welding technology.

Paul Randall, Director of Tri-Tech Skills Center in Kennewick, said students can benefit from engaging with skill centers because of their focus on tangible skills and outcomes.

“It coalesces the kids' thinking,” Randall said. “It's very application-based. ‘I am now applying all this stuff that was abstract before for a purpose.’”

There are 14 skill centers in Washington, with each offering a different combination of programs. Tri-Tech offers 19 CTE programs for students from 8 local school districts.

Randall said Tri-Tech considers three things when deciding whether to add a new program: whether the career area will pay a living wage; whether there's a need for that career path in Washington; and whether the career area is attractive to high school students.

When students have determined a career path they're certain they want to pursue, Tri-Tech and

other skill centers can also make worksite learning available. The skill center can partner with a business and arrange for students to get paid experience working for them.

Worksite learning is just one type of Work-Based Learning activity available in Washington. Other Work-Based Learning activities include guest speakers, field trips, and job shadows.

Work-Based Learning is made available through multiple CTE programs of study. Sarah Patterson, Workforce Development Director of the AGC Education Foundation, emphasized the importance of the experiential learning that happens during these activities.

“Nothing trumps walking onto a job site and actually seeing it, hearing it, smelling it, feeling it,” Patterson said. “Nothing is as powerful as talking to someone who is in the career field, who’s maybe 7 years older than you, but you hear their pathway, and you see, ‘If they can do it, I could absolutely do this.’”

Washington students can also access apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs, such as one operated by the Wenatchee School District that prepares students for roles as computer technicians. Many CTE programs provide opportunities for students to earn industry-recognized credentials. ([Find a full list of CTE pathways here](#), and [learn more about each pathway here](#).)

For students interested in pursuing post-secondary education, Washington schools offer a host of dual credit programs. These programs allow students to earn high school and college credit at the same time. Students can earn these credits through exam-based options — like Advanced Placement, Cambridge International, and International Baccalaureate programs — or course-based options — like College in the High School, Running Start, and CTE Dual Credit programs.

Additional Opportunities

Along with all the options above, Washington schools also cater instruction to student groups with specific needs, including:

Highly Capable Program: This program makes accelerated learning experiences available for young learners identified as highly capable.

Dual Language Programs: Classroom content is taught partly in English and partly in a partner language. Research shows that dual language education is the most effective way to close opportunity gaps for multilingual/English learners.

Open Doors Youth Reengagement: This program aims to reengage older youth who have dropped out of high school or are not expected to graduate high school by age 21.

Graduation, Reality, And Dual-Role Skills (GRADS): This program for pregnant teens and/or young parents focuses on work and family foundation skills.

Additional supports are provided to support equitable outcomes for all students, including Native American students, students whose parents serve in the military, students who are migratory, students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care, students whose parents are incarcerated, and students who are incarcerated or were previously incarcerated.

For more information, families can contact their local school district or visit the OSPI website.

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