Graduation Pathway Options Report | Foreword



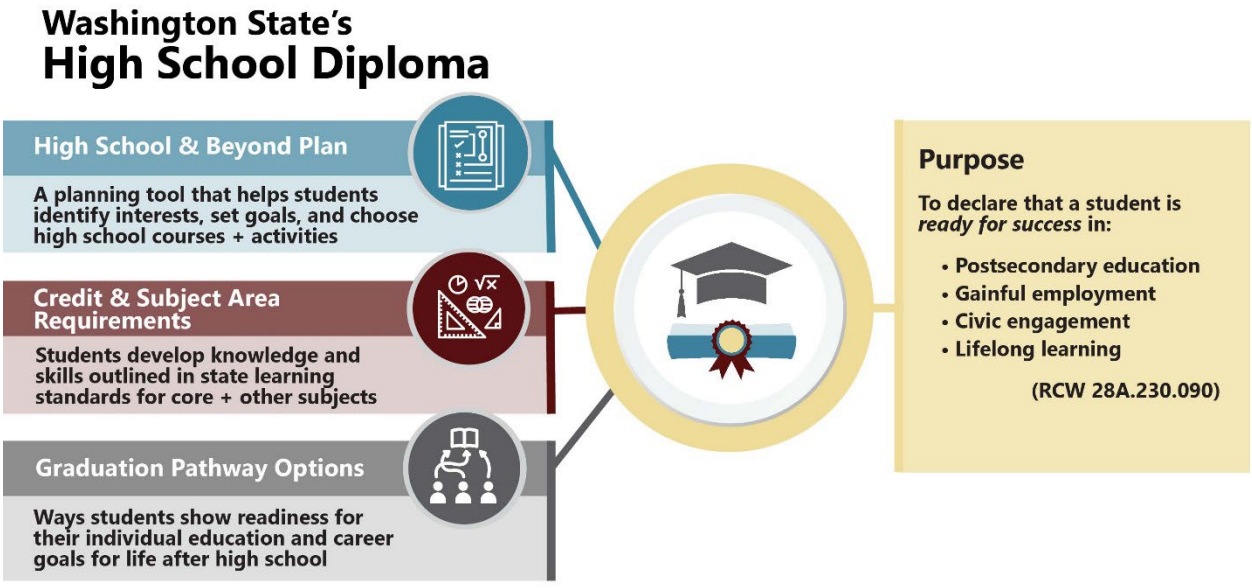
The Washington State
BOARD OF EDUCATION

The graduation pathway is one of three required components for earning a high school diploma (see Figure below). Each component serves a different function. Together they fulfill the purpose of the diploma in declaring a student is ready for success in postsecondary education, gainful employment, civic engagement, and lifelong learning.

While students develop knowledge and skills across subject areas by completing the Credit & Subject Area Requirements (i.e., 24-credit framework), the graduation pathway options provide students multiple ways to show readiness for their individual education and career goals. In other words, what makes the graduation pathway requirement distinct from other requirements is the **focus on the student's individual goals**. The pathway a student completes must align with the student's postsecondary goals as described in their High School and Beyond Plan.

Graduation pathway options include tests and advanced courses in English language arts and math, Career and Technical Education course sequences, and the military vocational aptitude test (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery).

In anticipation of potential barriers, the Legislature charged the State Board of Education with researching the first three years of pathways implementation to identify barriers and provide recommendations for changes to the existing pathways and additional pathways options. While implementation was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the research identified other challenges. The pathway options do not meet the needs of all students. In some cases, students complete pathways that do not match their individual goals, in which case the pathway is not serving its intended purpose. A strong, consistent theme we heard from students, families, and educators throughout three years of research is the need for more relevant, engaging, and authentic options, including options in subject areas beyond English and math, that can be customized to better align with students' individual goals.



Research questions:

The research, conducted by Strobel Consulting over the past three addressed the following questions called out in the legislation:

- Whether changes to the existing eight pathways should be made and what those changes should be;
- The barriers schools and districts have to offering all of the graduation pathways and recommendations to eliminate or reduce those barriers for school districts;
- Whether all students have equitable access to all the graduation pathways and, if not, recommendations for reducing the barriers students may have to accessing all the graduation pathways; and
- Whether additional graduation pathways should be included and recommendations for what those pathways should be.

Findings over the three years of study:

- The need for changes to the pathways was a recurrent theme across each year of the study. In the first year, respondents expressed less familiarity with the pathways and there was more uncertainty as to whether there should be changes or additions to the current graduation pathway options than in subsequent years. In Year 2, most respondents agreed that changes should be made to the current graduation pathway options, with a larger proportion of high school administrators and personnel than district personnel agreeing that changes should be made. In Year 3, about half of educators responding to the District Survey agreed that changes should be made (YR1, YR2, and YR3).
- The current graduation pathway options do not always align with students' post-graduation goals and need to be more relevant to what students want to do and achieve beyond high school. Stakeholders in each year of the study indicated that for many students the current pathway options do not provide a meaningful trajectory for organizing their learning in the context of their intended pursuits beyond high school (YR1, YR2, and YR3).
- In each year of the study, stakeholders reported there were barriers to offering all of the graduation pathway options. The most cited barriers included lack of resources, financial constraints/lack of funding, lack of certified teachers or staffing in general (YR1, YR2 and YR3).
- Respondents from districts/schools who reported they did not offer all the available graduation pathways suggested changes to address funding, staffing, and scheduling barriers would allow them to offer more pathway options (YR1, YR2 and YR3).

- Based on data from open ended survey items and focus group discussions in each year of the study, the area of greatest concern for stakeholders is the lack of equity for English learners (ELL's), students with a 504 plan, students receiving special education services, students experiencing homelessness, and other systemically marginalized populations when it comes to accessing a meaningful graduation pathway that aligns with their High School & Beyond Plan (YR1, YR2 and YR3).
- Results from open-ended survey items and feedback from focus group participants indicated that respondents believed the only graduation pathway option for students who do not test well, do not have strong reading or math skills, or are otherwise unable to meet one of the graduation pathway options involving a standardized assessment or other type of test, is the CTE sequence pathway. Therefore, it is highly inequitable if districts in the state do not have the ability to offer a CTE sequence that meets the pathway requirement. As of the 2020-21 school year, 19 percent of districts reported they are unable to offer a CTE sequence that meets pathway requirements (YR1, YR2 and YR3).
- The CTE pathway was another area that was consistently cited by survey respondents and focus group participants in each year of the study as being inequitable, especially for alternative and small to medium schools with fewer options for offering a variety of CTE courses, let alone a sequence, taught by certified teachers. The majority of educator respondents from districts that have a CTE sequence/s available did not feel that the sequence/s met the needs of all or most students or did not match their post high school plans. This implies that a large number of students in the state do not have access to a pathway that meets their needs and is relevant to their future goals (YR1, YR2 and YR3).
- Respondents noted in Year 1 that gainful employment, financial and domestic independence, and the desire to contribute to society in a meaningful way are worthy post-graduation goals and that a graduation pathway option specific to these types of goals should be available. Data collected during focus groups and on open-ended survey items in Years 2 and 3 further indicated that, regardless of students' post high school goals, there is a need for graduation pathway options to provide more opportunities for students to learn skills that prepare them for life and employability (YR1, YR2 and YR3).
- Respondents pointed out in Year 1 that the majority of current graduation pathway options address enrollment in some type of continuing education, or enlistment in a military branch, but lack options for students intending to enter the workforce immediately after school. Data collected during focus groups and on open-ended response survey items in Year 2 also indicated there is a lack of pathway options for students that intend to enter the trades or workforce directly after high school. In addition, students with these post high school goals lack opportunities for preparation and are largely unsupported by the graduation pathway options (YR1, YR2 and YR3).

Recommendations:

The following suggestions for future development are intended as a jumping off point for continuing to monitor, improve and refine the WA Graduation Pathway Options to ensure that they are equitable, meaningful, and relevant to each and every student. These suggestions are based on the data and feedback collected from stakeholders across the three years of the study and represent potential data driven ways to build on the work that has been done thus far.

- Students should have pathway options that more accurately reflect Washington's Profile of a Graduate. Specifically, pathway options need to provide more opportunities for students to cultivate personal growth and knowledge, solve problems, communicate effectively, sustain wellness, embrace differences/diversity, and master life skills/self-agency. Satisfying the requirements of current graduation pathway options do not necessarily support the important goals of Profile of a Graduate.

"My son is four-year college bound, but where are the hands-on experiences so he knows how to navigate life outside the classroom? I want him to have real world learning experiences in high school. He's smart and can pass all of the tests, but I worry when he gets to college, he won't know how to navigate the other important aspects of life." – Parent

- Graduation pathways need to include options that are meaningful for students regardless of their post high school goals and dreams. Specifically, there is a great need for graduation pathway options that require opportunities to master the skills and attributes needed to succeed in the 21st century job market, regardless of whether job attainment occurs immediately after high school or during/after post-secondary education. Future work in this area also ensures the graduation pathway options are more aligned with the purpose of the diploma as defined in statute (RCW 28A.230.090) and the Profile of a Graduate.

"Within the past two years, I've noticed people come to apply for a position lacking leadership skills and when asked how they would handle conflict resolution, they don't seem to know how to navigate through that. Conflict resolution can be a big deal!" - HR Manager, Walsh Construction

"10 percent of our students are going to be farmers and we don't recognize these things. There aren't pathways for them. They actually know what they want to do, and we can't support them." - Educator

- Students should have pathway options that truly reflect their High School and Beyond Plan. This requires that the High School and Beyond Plan be a meaningful instrument that informs the supports students receive in planning their coursework; satisfying the requirements of their chosen graduation pathway; and ensuring they leave high school with the skills, knowledge, and experiences they need to achieve their post-graduation goals, regardless of what those are.

"As a student, I wish that we worked backwards, where we asked students what they want to do and who they want to be and then built a pathway around that." – Student

- Data collected during all three years of the study strongly indicate the need for additional graduation pathway options, especially pathways that are not assessment based. Specifically, graduation pathways should be added that positively impact both equity for districts/schools in their ability to offer all of the graduation pathway options and increase the likelihood that all students have access to pathways that are meaningful and supportive of their post-graduation goals. Future work on the incorporation, design, and parameters of additional pathways is needed and should be informed by stakeholders such as educators, parents/caregivers, industry professionals, other content experts, and most especially students.

"I'm from a small district with only two CTE pathways and these are not meaningful to most of the students who are taking them, but it's their only option, so we're all complicit in making them take courses that mean nothing to them, because we want them to have that diploma." – Educator

- Graduation pathway options and the parameters under which they are satisfied need to be more student driven and incorporate greater opportunities for mastery-based learning. This provides students the opportunity to apply their learning in real world settings, and demonstrate skill attainment and academic mastery in ways that truly reflect their learning experiences, inspire them to be lifelong learners, and honor their post-graduation goals.

"Not every student has the luxury of missing classes for external learning opportunities, but I've learned absolutely nothing in school taking and passing my AP tests. The things I've learned that matter most to me have all come from the opportunities I have outside of school, in the real world." – Student

"We so rarely ask students what they want, what they need. We tell them what we think they need and should do, but that's not what prepares a student for life. It doesn't inspire them and it doesn't help them. We are failing students if we don't ask them what they need." – Educator

"No one knows what I want to do after I leave school. Maybe I don't even know, but it's not the pathways. I don't know how to get where I want and do what I'm supposed to at the same time." – Student

State Board of Education 2022 Legislative Request:

Based on the research, and in response to the Legislature's charge, the Board proposes adding two options to the graduation pathways that school districts may offer: a performance-based pathway and a work-related pathway. These new options will allow students to show what they know and can do in real-world, hands-on ways that align with their individual goals for after high school. They allow students to focus their pathway in two core subject areas (from list below) that most directly align with their education or career goals.

The performance-based and work-related options may take a variety of forms – such as a project, practicum, cultural activity, paid or unpaid work experience, community service, internship, apprenticeship or pre-apprenticeship – and may result in a variety of products that can be evaluated – such as a performance, presentation, portfolio, report, film, or exhibit. But, to count as a graduation pathway, the learning experience must meet state requirements regarding the safety and quality of the learning experience and the assessment criteria for determining the student has applied the learning standards. Evaluation of the student's performance must include at least one qualified teacher in each relevant subject area, and the school district must adopt a local policy that meets state requirements before offering the pathway option. The proposal also establishes ongoing data and monitoring requirements at the state and local levels.

In addition, the State Board is supporting efforts lead by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to improve the High School and Beyond Plan to better support students as they progress through the system. The SBE will continue to work toward equitable implementation of graduation pathways that permit authentic demonstration what students know and are able to do and are aligned to each individual student's High School and Beyond Plan.