



Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

Washington K–12 Transcript Weighted GPA

2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2020 Legislature tasked the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) with putting together a workgroup in consultation with other education groups and institutions to examine the Washington K–12 standardized transcript and to review and report back on potential changes to the standardized transcript. This included, but was not limited to, allowing the use of a weighted grade point average (GPA) for accelerated coursework. The workgroup reviewed K–12 and higher education practices and policies as well as data on the availability of accelerated coursework across the state and for specific student groups.

The workgroup recommends that weighted GPAs not be adopted at this time. Instead, the workgroup recommends this issue be revisited after school districts have enough time to put their policies around academic acceleration in place. As specified in Revised Code of Washington (RCW) [28A.230.090](#), the state has sufficient time to evaluate the impact of these policies on increasing equitable access to accelerated coursework for all students. An evaluation of these efforts would be appropriate in the 2025–26 school year. Students in 7th grade when [House Bill 1599](#) passed will have graduated by that time.

Additionally, the workgroup also recommends that the Transcript Workgroup continue to meet to address the following K–12 Transcript issues:

- An electronic transcript
- Designation of graduation pathways
- Updating and designation of College Academic Distribution Requirements (CADRs)
- Inclusion of incomplete grades starting Spring 2020 and beyond
- Inclusion of course designation code 'Y' for Youth Re-Engagement Dual Credit courses

OSPI will schedule and facilitate the meetings per the intent of [RCW 28A.230.125](#) and will use the first meeting to prioritize the order in which the workgroup will address the issues.

INTRODUCTION

The 2020 Supplemental Operating Budget requires OSPI to work in consultation with Washington's four-year higher education institutions, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), and the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board (WTB), to review and report on potential changes to the standardized high school transcript, including, but not limited to, allowing the use of a weighted GPA for accelerated coursework.

OSPI focused on two objectives: 1) producing recommendations specific to a weighted GPA and 2) generating an agreed-upon list of other transcript issues that the workgroup would pursue on a later timeline.

RCW 28A.230.125 requires OSPI, in partnership with Washington's four-year institutions, SBCTC and WTB to create and maintain a Washington K–12 standardized high school transcript.

BACKGROUND

OSPI worked with our partners, as identified in the statute, to recognize representatives from both public and private four-year higher education institutions, the Council of Presidents (COP), Independent Colleges of Washington (ICW), SBCTC, and the WTB. Individuals were also identified to represent high school administrators, school counselors, and other higher education stakeholders. The full list of workgroup members can be found in Appendix A.

The workgroup met four times in November and December 2020. The workgroup committed to keeping equity at the front and center of our discussions as we examined the feasibility and utility of implementing a weighted GPA to encourage students to participate in accelerated coursework. Specifically, the workgroup used the following questions to guide the development of the recommendations:

- **How do we define accelerated coursework?** The proviso language uses the term accelerated. Is accelerated the same or different than rigorous or dual credit coursework?
- **Would a weighted GPA encourage more students to take accelerated coursework?** Is the fear of negatively impacting one's GPA the only barrier to participation in accelerated coursework? Are there other barriers? Is this the right or most effective mechanism to encourage participation in accelerated course work?
- **What about issues of equity?** Do all students have access to accelerated coursework, or are there systemic barriers to accessing accelerated coursework that might further the opportunity gaps of students experiencing poverty and Black and Indigenous students of color?
- **Are there other impacts of using a weighted GPA on students, schools, and higher education institutions that need to be considered?**

Definition of Accelerated Coursework

The workgroup needed to define “accelerated coursework” to focus the work and develop recommendations. The workgroup examined existing Washington state law and how school districts currently define accelerated coursework, and how other states identified courses that would receive additional weight in the GPA calculation. The existing statutes, RCW 28A.320.195 and RCW 28A.230.090, identify processes to ensure all students have access to accelerated coursework. Still, it does not specify courses that could be identified at the state-level as accelerated that would be candidates for weighting. The review of Washington school district practices around accelerated coursework found that districts define accelerated coursework differently.

- [Northshore’s definition: “High School Accelerated Programs – Overview:](#) “In high school, students have a variety of options for engaging in advanced-level work. These options include Running Start, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and College in the High School. Students do not need to be qualified for Highly Capable services to enroll in these programs. High school counselors work with students to advise them of opportunities for advanced learning. Some of these opportunities, such as Career and Technical Education, may only be offered at specific locations. (...) High school students should work with their guidance counselors to develop an academic plan that best fits their needs, preferences, and goals.”
- [Lake Washington SD’s:](#) “Lake Washington School District provides accelerated academic programs for students in kindergarten through 12th grade. These programs are designed to meet the students’ learning styles and needs with exceptional intellectual, academic, and creative abilities.”

The review of other states’ practices also showed variability in how school districts determine which courses to give greater weight in GPA calculations and a lack of a consistent and broadly accepted standards that could guide this work. With no statutory definition of accelerated coursework and no single adopted model to follow from Washington school districts or other states, the group defined “accelerated coursework” as dual credit courses as already designated on the K–12 standardized transcript and in the OSPI Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS). These include Advanced Placement (AP), College in the High School (CiHS), International Baccalaureate (IB), Cambridge International (CI), Running Start, and Career and Technical Education (CTE) Dual Credit courses. Dual Credit course can count towards both high school and college credit. The workgroup intentionally excluded honors courses in this definition because there is no standard to determine if a course is designated as honors.

Would a Weighted GPA Encourage Students to Take Accelerated Coursework?

The guiding question this workgroup explored was this: Would weighted GPA points for accelerated courses increase students’ willingness to take the risk of enrolling in a more rigorous course? GPAs are a familiar and universal metric associated with academic success, the college admission process and class ranking. Allowing students, the opportunity to increase their academic

standing using a weighted GPA may provide an incentive for some students to take accelerated classes. Also, the knowledge that their weighted GPA would be less impacted by earning a lower grade is another consideration for students.

However, for many students, a weighted GPA may not be an incentive to increase participation in accelerated coursework. Colleges that recalculate GPAs to weight them typically only use the core academic courses in that calculation. Therefore, it may discourage students who do not have access to accelerated courses aligned with their interests or who are not ready for accelerated coursework. Weighted GPAs may also convey a message that without accelerated coursework as defined, students would not have the option of attending a baccalaureate college.

A higher GPA is also commonly viewed by students and families as beneficial in the college admissions process. However, many higher education institutions do not use weighted GPAs or they use their own weighting process. The Washington public four-year higher education institutions do not use weighted GPAs for admission decisions nor for merit-based scholarship decisions. They are committed to making admissions decisions using equitable criteria for all applicants, including non-residents, independent school students, and homeschooled students. Additionally, GPAs may be overweighted in their calculation using inconsistent or flawed methods¹ or may not predict student success in college. In general, more selective colleges and universities still use weighted GPAs for admissions decisions but almost all baccalaureate institutions have moved to a more holistic review of application materials, to address the historical and systemic inequities in college admissions. These institutions are more focused on the rigor of courses taken relative to what is available to the student and the student's performance in courses.

What About Issues of Equity?

Access to Accelerated Coursework is not the Same Across the State or for all Students

Figure 1 shows that the availability of accelerated courses is not uniform across the state. 71% of districts and 55% of schools offered one or more AP courses in the 2019–20 school year, and the results are similar for College in the High School and Running Start, the other large dual credit programs. The workgroup acknowledged that data simply showing the number of schools offering one or more accelerated courses was an incomplete picture of equitable access but still indicates the disparity in access across districts.

¹ Lang, D. M. (2007). Class Rank, GPA, and Valedictorians: How High Schools Rank Students. *American Secondary Education*, 35(2), 36–48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41406287>

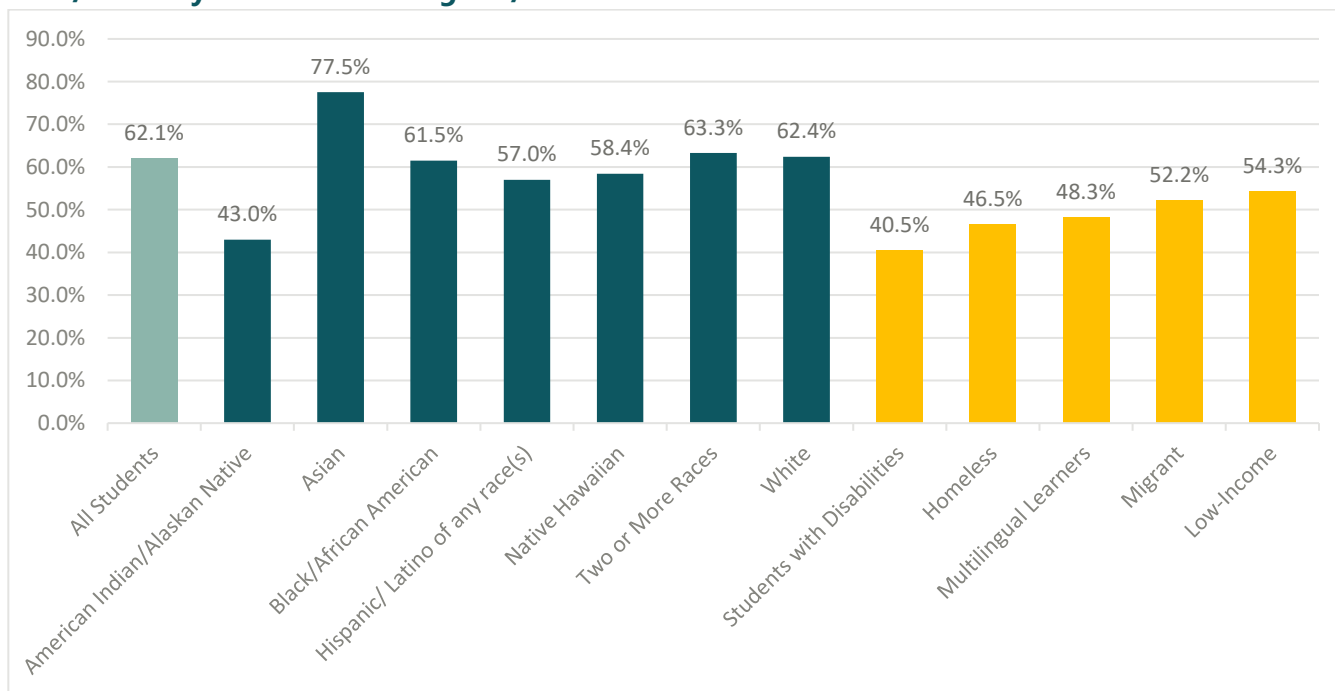
Figure 1: District and School-Level Accelerated Course Availability in 2019–20

Accelerated Course Type	District Count	District Percent	School Count	School Percent
AP	187	71%	345	55%
Cambridge	4	2%	4	1%
College in the High School	203	77%	302	48%
International Baccalaureate	21	8%	29	5%
Running Start	202	77%	359	57%

Source: CEDARS, 11/30/2020 – Count of schools/districts offering courses only includes those that have 9–12th grade students enrolled in the 2019–20 school year.

In addition to the school-level finding that there is a correlation between the percentage of the school population that is low income and AP course availability, Figure 2 shows that student groups are not equally represented in accelerated coursework enrollment. There are opportunity gaps between groups of students across all types of accelerated coursework. Fewer students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and some race/ethnicity groups—particularly American Indian/Alaskan Native—completed dual credit courses.

Figure 2: SY 2020–21 Percentage of High School Students Completed a Dual Credit Course by Race/Ethnicity and Student Program/Characteristics



Additionally, data from the Washington Student Achievement Council’s (WSAC) [Equity Landscape Report: Exploring Equity Gaps in Washington Postsecondary Education](#) (pages 10-13) shows that in 2019, certain student groups, including students who are American Indian, Hispanic, or low income, are underrepresented in almost all types of dual credit courses.

Other Potential Impacts of a Weighted GPA on Students and the Education System

Widens the Historical and Systematic Inequities of Access to and Engagement in Accelerated Coursework

Washington data (see Figures 1 and 2) show differences in access to accelerated learning courses across student demographic groups and schools and districts. Historically, larger schools and schools in the more densely populated areas of our state have been inherently positioned to offer greater access to in-person models of rigorous coursework, whether at the high school or a nearby college or university. In comparison, smaller and more rural schools have often had to use online or co-delivered dual credit course options to provide students access to advanced courses, which are less than ideal instructional models. The inclusion of weighted GPA on transcripts may increase the inequities stemming from a lack of access to accelerated learning opportunities in Washington.

May Impact the College-going Rate in Washington ²

Job creation and demand in industries requiring credentialed workers (healthcare, consulting, business, finance, education, and government services) is growing. ³ However, 40% of Washington's graduating class of 2018 did not enroll in any type of college coursework within the first year after graduation. ⁴

The use of weighted GPAs that only incorporate the core academic courses could impact how students engage in preparing for post-high school opportunities. Additionally, students who lack access to course options or the needed academic support and encouragement to pursue accelerated learning may not consider preparing for college a viable route and thus opt-out of pursuing further education at a baccalaureate institution after high school.

Exaggerates Importance of Participation in Accelerated Courses in Core Academic Subject Areas

Completing accelerated courses can provide meaningful information about a student's preparation for college. Teacher expectations, professional development, training, pedagogy, and experience all factor into determining the rigor of a course. However, it is an overgeneralization to assume accelerated learning as defined is more rigorous than non-accelerated courses.

² Washington Round Table. 2020 July. Restarting Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic. Waroundtable.com. https://www.waroundtable.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/P270_RestartingAmidstCovid_7.2020.pdf

³ Washington Round Table. 2018 July. The Path to 70% Credential Attainment. Waroundtable.com. https://www.waroundtable.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/WKWJ-Path-to-70-Credential-Attain_FINAL-REPORT.pdf

⁴ Education Research & Data Center. High School Graduate Outcomes Dashboard. 2020 June. Washington State Office of Financial Management. <https://erdc.wa.gov/data-dashboards/high-school-graduate-outcomes>

The inclusion of core academic courses in a weighted GPA as the gauge of a student's ability to engage in accelerated coursework is also an incomplete measure. Weighted GPAs leave out students who excel in career and technical education programs and do not take into account students with cognitive, linguistic or other impacts on their academic abilities for whom general education courses may be considered "accelerated" learning.

Based on how accelerated learning is currently defined, a student's individual achievement and success cannot simply be determined by the type or number of rigorous or advanced courses a student completes. Elevating academically advanced students may contribute to the continued exacerbation of inequities among student groups, student disengagement from learning, and the under-valuing of individual student effort and achievement, whether academic or personal.

Narrow Focus on GPA is Misaligned with Holistic and Multiple-Measure Best Practices in Education

An unweighted GPA gives equal weighting to all courses, which more equitably acknowledges students' varying interests and academic skills. The weighted GPA scale implicitly factors in an assumption of the difficulty in earning an "A" grade. The level of effort to achieve that grade varies by student. High schools may use a weighted GPA with the belief that it represents students' actual academic accomplishments. This may not consider whether grades represent learning and skill mastery or work completion, test-taking abilities and other measures of students' academic success. Students are best served when they seek learning and skill-building, not just a metric to measure their academic accomplishments.

Baccalaureate colleges and universities have increasingly used a more holistic review of student readiness for college to mitigate many of the inequities inherent in students' academic preparation. The review process considers course selection relative to available options, GPAs, writing skills, test scores, and other academic performance indicators as well as engagement in activities, leadership, and community service, letters of recommendation, and personal circumstances and characteristics.

Weighted GPAs May Increase Academic Pressure and Contribute to Behavioral and Mental Health Issues for Students

There is growing information and awareness of competitive school environments' potential impact on mental and behavioral health.⁵ Emerging research finds that public and private schools noted as "high-achieving schools" are experiencing higher rates of behavioral/mental health problems, which may be attributed in part to academic pressure experienced by students. This may have an impact on both academically high-achieving students who feel compelled to take more accelerated courses in order to 'compete' college admissions, and for students who may lack access to

⁵ [Healthy Youth Survey 2018 Analytic Report](#). Washington State Health Care Authority, Department of Health, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Liquor and Cannabis Board, November 2019.

resources and support for engaging in accelerated coursework and feel as if they are not able or equipped to “measure up” to their peers.⁶

Changes Related to K–12 and Higher Education Resources and Personnel

Washington has made significant investments over the last five years in adjusting graduation requirements to better align with students’ interests, directly connect more students to accelerated learning opportunities, and prepare all students for further education or training after high school. These recent legislative changes will ensure more students are better equipped to access and engage in accelerated courses, including courses not traditionally considered in the calculation of weighted GPAs.

As established earlier, research is still limited about the potential for increasing engagement in accelerated coursework due to weighted GPAs. However, this workgroup anticipates improvements in postsecondary enrollment resulting from these recent legislative investments, including: better academic advising resulting from adequate student counselor-to-student ratio (or staff-to-student ratio), development of new accelerated learning and graduation pathway opportunities, high-quality in-person instruction and support from trained educators and additional academic and social/emotional support from high school counselors, career counselors and specialists, college access providers, and educators.

Washington’s colleges and universities have also been adjusting their practices by reducing the emphasis on grades and test scores, adding more non-academic factors to consider in their admissions process and providing more academic and social/emotional supports for students. If the state were to adopt a weighted GPA, Washington’s colleges and universities would need to invest time in understanding the differences among weighted GPA calculations across the school districts, including determining the extent to which students had access to accelerated coursework. Adding this layer of analysis into the college admissions process would likely increase the administrative burden on admissions staff and could impact and delay scholarship awards admissions decisions.

⁶ Jennifer Breheny Wallace. “On Parenting | Perspective,” The Washington Post, September 26, 2019. [Students in high-achieving schools are now named an “at-risk” group](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS & NEXT STEPS

Recommendations Around the Implementation of Weighted GPA

The workgroup recommends that weighted GPAs not be adopted at this time but instead be revisited after school districts have adequate time to implement policies around academic acceleration, as specified in RCW 28A.320.195 and RCW 28A.230.090, and the inclusion of financial aid application information as a required component in the high school and beyond plan, as specified in RCW 28A.230.090. HB1599, which was just enacted in the 2019–20 school year, required districts to add the financial aid information to the high school and beyond plan and adopt an academic acceleration policy by the 2021–22 school year. The workgroup recommends that school districts be given sufficient time to implement these policy changes and integrate this effort into the academic guidance that students receive to see if it is adequate to achieve the goal of having more students participate in accelerated coursework and matriculate to a college or university for further post-high school education. An evaluation of impacts from these policy changes would be appropriate during and after the 2025–26 school year, allowing adequate time for students in 7th grade when House Bill 1599 (2019) passed to have graduated.

Recommendations of Other K–12 Transcript Issues for Further Discussion

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, in consultation with the four-year institutions as defined in RCW 28B.76.020, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, and the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, will report on potential adjustments or alterations to the standard high school transcript created under RCW 28A.230.125, including consideration of:

- An electronic transcript
- Designation of graduation pathways
- Updating and designation of College Admission Distribution Requirements (CADRs)
- Inclusion of incomplete grades for 2020–21 and beyond
- Inclusion of course designation code 'Y' for Youth Re-Engagement Dual Credit courses

The workgroup recommends that the Transcript Workgroup continue to meet with final recommendations to be reflected in changes to the OSPI Transcript User Guide and FAQs. These changes would provide the foundation for communicating updated expectations around the contents and structure of the Washington K–12 standardized transcript or through other mechanisms appropriate to the recommendation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

OSPI would like to acknowledge the participants on the workgroup (see Appendix A) who informed the process and the crafting of these recommendations. OSPI appreciates all the workgroup members who volunteered their time and efforts to participate as representatives of their organization to the workgroup.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Transcript Workgroup Membership

- Association of Washington School Principals: Scott Friedman
- Council of Presidents: Julie Garver
- Council of Presidents: Ruben Flores
- Independent Colleges of Washington: Terri Standish-Kuon
- OSPI: Jason Boatwright
- OSPI: Katie Weaver Randall
- OSPI: Katherine Keller
- OSPI: Kim Reykdal
- OSPI: Lisa Ireland
- Washington School Counselor Association: Jenny Morgan
- WA SBCTC: Jamie Traugott
- WA SBCTC: Joe Holliday
- Washington Student Achievement Council: Amelia Moore
- WTB: Eric Wolf
- Eastern Washington University: Jana Jaraysi
- Pacific Lutheran University: Melody Ferguson
- University of Puget Sound: Matthew Boyce
- University of Washington: Paul Seegert
- Walla Walla University: Dale Milam
- Washington State University: Nancy Wehrung
- Western Washington University: Cezar Mesquita
- Whitworth University: Greg Orwig

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