

Postsecondary Enrollment Trends: Fewer Washington High School Graduates in the Classes of 2020 and 2021 Enrolled Directly in Postsecondary Education



RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

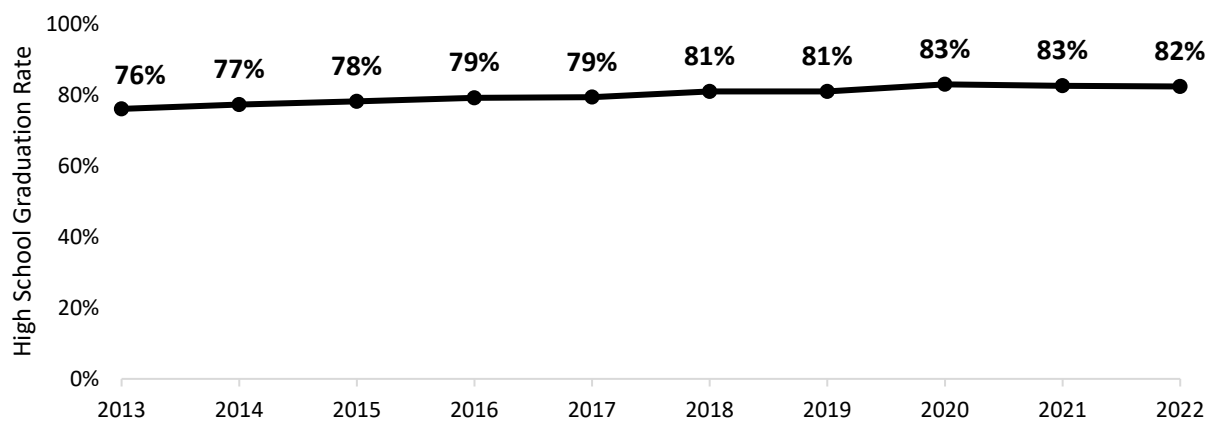
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Washington’s high school graduation rate has increased over the past decade. In 2022, 82 percent of high school students in the state graduated in four years, a six-percentage point increase over the 2013 graduation rate (Figure 1). Even during the heightened challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the graduation rate continued to rise. The steady progress in the state’s graduation rate provides evidence of the ongoing commitment to ensuring more students complete high school so they are prepared to pursue a range of education and career opportunities after graduation.

Washington’s high school graduation rate has increased in recent years.

Figure 1



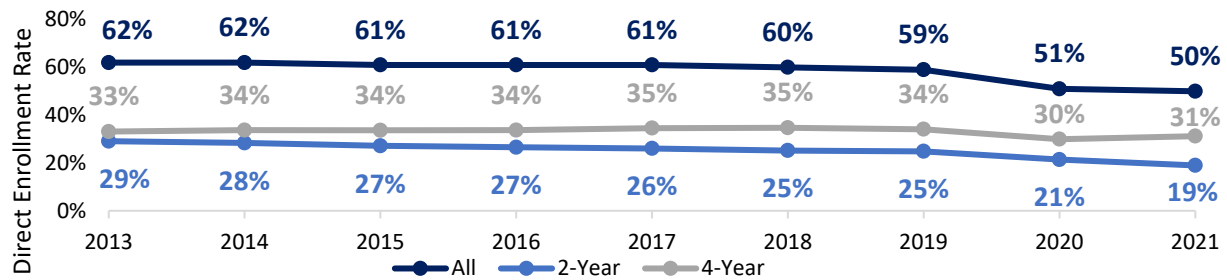
Source: Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Report Card

Despite the steady increase in the high school graduation rate, the direct high school to postsecondary transition rate has been relatively stagnant over the past decade. Between 2013 and 2021, the number of graduates in the state grew from about 66,000 to about 74,000, but the direct enrollment rate hovered at approximately 60 percent. Ongoing challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic raised concern over whether high school students in Washington would pursue postsecondary education following graduation. [Disrupted learning](#), [lower FAFSA completion](#), and [postsecondary enrollment decline](#) have all indicated the possibility of a lower transition rate for high school students.

New [data](#) from the Education Research and Data Center shows that the COVID-19 pandemic took a significant toll on the direct postsecondary enrollment rate in the state. Just 51 percent of the Class of 2020 enrolled in a two-year or four-year institution within a year of high school graduation, compared to 59 percent of the Class of 2019. Direct enrollment did not rebound for the Class of 2021 (Figure 2).

Washington’s direct enrollment rate dropped nine percentage points between 2019 and 2021.

Figure 2

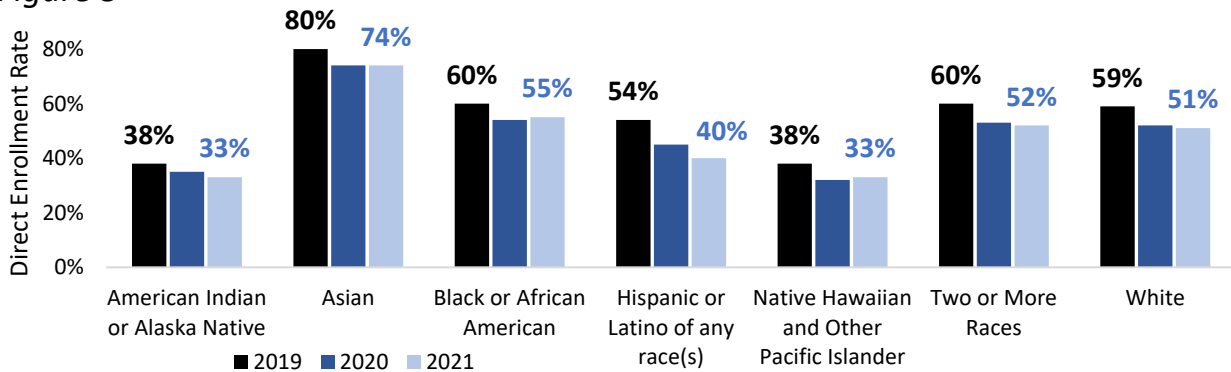


Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) High School Graduate Outcomes Dashboard

Declines in the direct enrollment rate varied by race, which could further exacerbate existing [racial inequities](#) in postsecondary enrollment. The largest decline in direct enrollment was among Hispanic or Latino students. In total, the direct enrollment rate was 14 percentage points lower for Hispanic or Latino students in the Class of 2021 than before the pandemic, a considerably larger decline than all other racial groups (Figure 3).

The direct enrollment rate declined most significantly for Hispanic or Latino students.

Figure 3



Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) High School Graduate Outcomes Dashboard

The decline in direct enrollment is amplifying a problematic trend for the state.

As evidence of the pandemic’s impact on students continues to mount, it is increasingly important that the state continues to provide ample resources and supports to students furthest from educational equity. For example, the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) is working with partners across the state to build a more supportive environment for college access and success through the [Regional Challenge Grant](#). WSAC is also engaged in a [variety of efforts](#) to improve access to financial aid. In order to make progress on Washington’s educational attainment goals, the state must work to provide accessible and equitable pathways for high school students to transition directly into postsecondary education opportunities.