



What We Do

WSAC's College Access Initiatives (CAI) Division

February 2025

The past five years in college access have been challenging—from the pandemic's swift impact on outreach and enrollment to the problematic rollout of last year's new [Free Application for Federal Student Aid](#) (FAFSA). Throughout these challenges, WSAC's College Access Initiatives (CAI) division has continued to support middle and high school counselors, students and families, and community-based organizations. Our work spans many initiatives, including [College Bound](#), [OtterBot](#), the [12th Year Campaign](#), and [Aim Higher](#). These initiatives—plus our customer service orientation—provide counselors, students, and families with what they need, when they need it.

In this brief, we highlight CAI's efforts as the state's primary infrastructure for college and financial aid outreach and support. In addition to serving as the trusted source for student aid data, we also communicate key information, conduct trainings, distribute critical resources, and provide one-on-one technical assistance to counselors, students, and families.

Are [College Bound](#) and [WA Grant](#) different programs?

Yes. College Bound (CB) provides an early commitment of state funding for eligible students in 7th, 8th and those newly eligible in 9th grade, encouraging early college planning. College Bound increases awareness of financial aid opportunities and supports FAFSA/WASFA completion.

A student who receives the College Bound commitment may see in their award letter a large award for WA Grant and a small award for College Bound. This is because WA Grant funds cover most of College Bound's commitment. However, this can often lead to confusion, as students may expect a large College Bound award instead. Furthermore, income-eligible students who were not enrolled in College Bound can still qualify for WA Grant.

We Are Washington's Trusted Source for Student Aid Data

CAI provides counselors, educators, and college access professionals—who we call trusted messengers—with up-to-date tools like the College Bound toolbox and FAFSA completion data portal. Our free trainings and up-to-date resources ensure that these trusted messengers can help students and families, especially those from low-income backgrounds, navigate their post-high school planning.

FAFSA Completion Dashboards

Two WSAC dashboards offer critical information on FAFSA completion rates for high school seniors.^a

- The [Washington State Public School Expected Graduates FAFSA Completion Dashboard](#) tracks FAFSA completion progress for high school seniors. The dashboard is updated weekly for the duration of each FAFSA cycle, typically between December and the following October. Users can filter completion rates by school district, school, and year.

^a Both dashboards maintain student privacy and display only aggregated and suppressed data.

- The *WSAC Strategic Action Plan Dashboard* provides annual data on FAFSA completion rates for Washington's expected high school graduates. Users can disaggregate final rates by region and demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender).

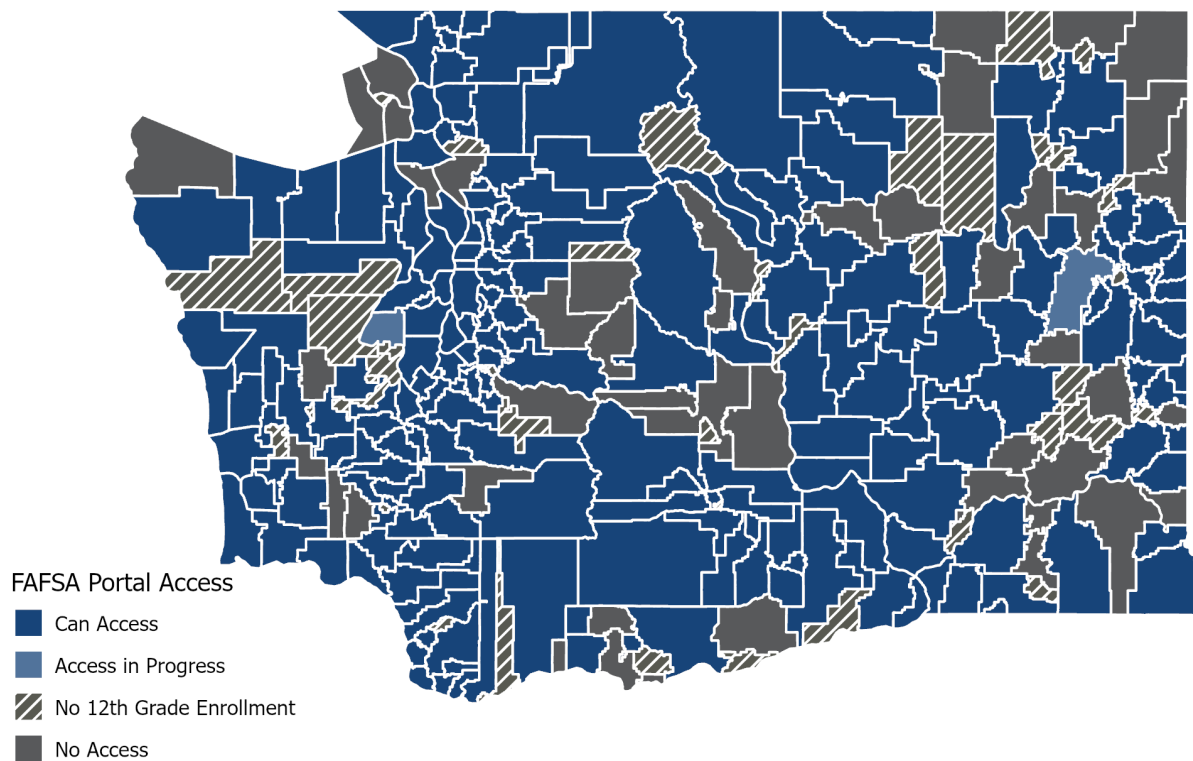
College Bound Toolbox

The College Bound Toolbox is an online portal that enables school and district staff to view their roster of College Bound students, update students' contact details, and send secure messages to CAI staff.

FAFSA Completion Portal

Over 190 school districts have signed a data-sharing agreement (DSA) with WSAC that provides school and district staff access to the online FAFSA portal. They can view seniors' FAFSA completion statuses (completed, submitted, not yet started) within the portal, then prioritize data-informed follow-up.^b

Figure 1. Over two-thirds of school districts can access WSAC's FAFSA Completion Portal



Note: Portal access registered based on whether the district has a signed data sharing agreement (DSA) with WSAC as of January 27, 2025. Of the 295 school districts in Washington, 206 have an active or in-progress DSA. Of the remaining 89 districts, 43 do not enroll high school seniors and 46 have not yet established access.

^b Approved partner organizations may be eligible for limited access, depending on their organization and role.

Our 2023-24 Academic Year Outreach



347

Avg. CAI calls & emails each month



67

Events with schools & community-based organizations (CBOs)



49

FAFSA/financial aid trainings



550,064

OtterBot messages sent to HS seniors & parents about 2024-25 FAFSA rollout



43,952

College and Career Knowledge books distributed statewide (English & Spanish)



2,160

Est. attendees at CAI's FAFSA/financial aid trainings



272

School districts with access to the College Bound toolbox



193

School districts that enroll HS seniors have FAFSA portal access



791

Active users in the FAFSA portal



276

High schools with low FAFSA filing rates received direct support from CAI staff



349

Trusted messengers registered for College Bound updates webinar



900

School & CBO staff connections at the fall [WCHSCR](#) tour

We Provide Direct Support to Counselors, Students, and Families

Increasing awareness about financial aid lowers the barrier of entry to postsecondary planning for students *and* for their families. CAI works to do exactly this through multiple avenues, including through direct outreach to counselors, students, *and* families. We highlight key outreach activities below.

Financial Aid Trainings and Webinars

CAI offers a range of webinars and training sessions to equip trusted messengers with the tools and knowledge to support students and families navigating financial aid and college readiness.

- *Annual College Bound Fall Webinar.* This webinar provides school and district staff with updates on the College Bound program, including auto-enrollment processes, resources, and recent changes to better support College Bound students. Attendance at this webinar averages over 200 trusted messengers.
- *WSAC Wednesdays.* Hosted by CAI on the first Wednesday of each month, these sessions offer an open Q&A platform for practitioners to discuss their college and financial aid questions. These sessions function as small group conversations, with each attendee bringing specific questions.
- *OSPI-WSAC Wednesday Webinar Series.* This series, co-hosted by WSAC and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), features 3-4 webinars annually for school counselors and support staff. These sessions provide timely information on college readiness, financial aid, policy updates, and practical tools to guide students in academic, social-emotional, and postsecondary planning.^c Attendance at the webinar series averages over 200 trusted messengers.
- *Aim Higher Washington.* Aim Higher offers live virtual trainings and strategy sessions on financial aid basics and application navigation, catering to K-12 and college staff, community organizations, and anyone interested in supporting their community with financial aid knowledge.^d Attendance at Aim Higher's virtual trainings averages around 50 trusted messengers.
- *FSA ID Creation Events.* Between September and December 2024, CAI's 12th Year Campaign hosted ten FSA ID creation events to encourage students and families to create their FSA ID while everyone waited for the FAFSA to open. These events are critical because, with the new FAFSA process, there is a necessary time delay between the creation of an ID and when the form can be completed. Attendance at last fall's FSA ID creation events averaged nearly 60 individuals.

^c Registration information is [here](#), and more information is available in the [Wednesday Webinar Archives](#).

^d Aim Higher Washington events are delivered in partnership with the State Board for Community and Technical College (SBCTC), Council of Presidents (COP), and Independent Colleges of Washington (ICW).

Financial Aid Outreach Campaigns to School Staff

In the fall and spring each year, CAI uses school-level data on FSA ID creation and FAFSA completion rates to conduct targeted school outreach. These early intervention campaigns equip school staff with the tools they need to effectively guide students through the financial aid process.

- *Fall FSA ID Campaign.* In the fall, CAI directly contacted schools where fewer than 15 percent of seniors have completed an FSA ID. Staff provided tools and resources that are responsive to trusted messengers' needs, so that they are empowered to motivate students to create FSA IDs and WASFA accounts even before the applications may formally open.
- *Spring FAFSA Completion Campaign.* In early spring, CAI reaches out to schools with lower completion rates, encouraging the use of the FAFSA Completion Portal and WSAC resources while gathering insights into challenges schools face and identifying ways to support their efforts. Outreach for this year's spring campaign began in January 2025.

OtterBot Text Messaging Outreach

OtterBot launched in fall 2019 with the goal to increase financial aid awareness among its audience of less than 10,000 high school seniors eligible for College Bound. In the time since, CAI has expanded the bot's reach to serve more than 33,000 high school students and 95,000 parents each year.

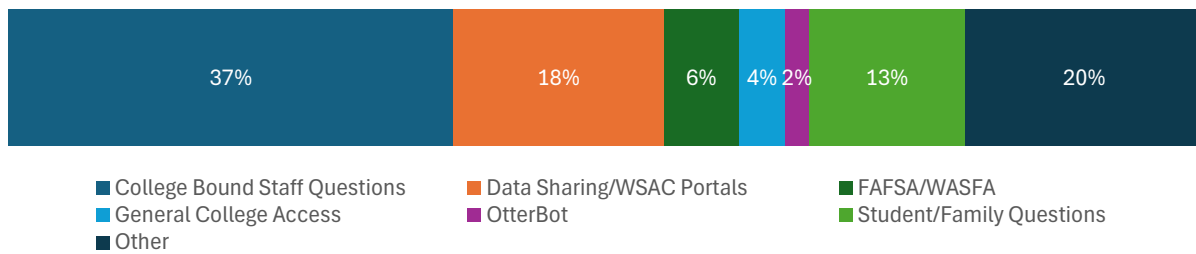
- During last year's FAFSA rollout, OtterBot launched 20 campaigns to seniors and parents. In total, these audiences received over half a million text messages about filing for financial aid.
- This past fall, when the FAFSA opening date was delayed again, OtterBot sent messages to approximately 8,000 high school seniors and 24,000 senior parents/guardians, encouraging early creation of an FSA ID or WASFA account.

For the class of 2024, preliminary data showed that College Bound students who were contacted by OtterBot had a FAFSA completion rate 14 percentage points (pp) higher than students who were not contacted, and 6pp higher relative to the statewide FAFSA filing rate of 50%.

Direct Support by Phone and Email

CAI's technical assistance—either over email or by phone—provides space for trusted messengers to raise issues and questions they encounter. Students and families also reach out directly to ask sensitive questions specific to their family context. During last year's FAFSA challenges, when FSA struggled to provide adequate support to FAFSA filers, CAI answered more calls and responded to more emails than usual, resolving informational inaccuracies along the way. Nearly half of the calls and emails that CAI received between May and August 2024 included general questions about postsecondary pathways and financial aid options.

Figure 2. Over 1,500 calls/emails last spring-summer covered general college and financial aid topics



Note: This bar graph tracks topics for 3,515 calls/emails to CAI staff between May 2024, when tracking began, and January 2025.

Trusted Messengers Trust

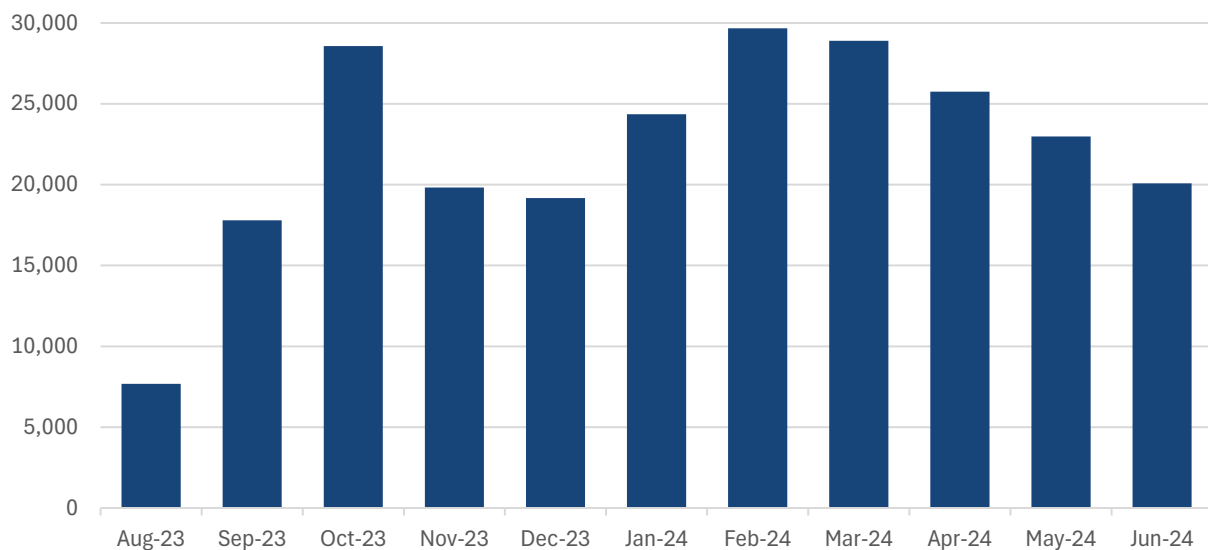
Our Resources

CAI's website provides trusted messengers with essential information, resources, training, and tools to support students' college and financial aid journeys. With over 200,000 visits to CAI's three central webpages—[College Bound](#), [12th Year Campaign](#), and [OtterBot](#)—during the 2023-24 academic year, the information included on these sites plays a critical role during students' post-high school planning. CAI's materials also intentionally address national resources' informational gaps about Washington context.

Financial Aid Award Letter Technical Assistance

Families often struggle to understand the financial aid award letters that colleges and universities send. CAI provides students, families, and trusted messengers with individualized guidance on how to interpret and compare letters, and how to check that they received the aid they expected to receive. When needed, CAI can quickly escalate an issue to WSAC's Student Financial Assistance (SFA) team.

Figure 3. CAI's websites consistently receive nearly 30,000 monthly visitors during peak periods



How We Lead the Way: A Spotlight on Critical Resources

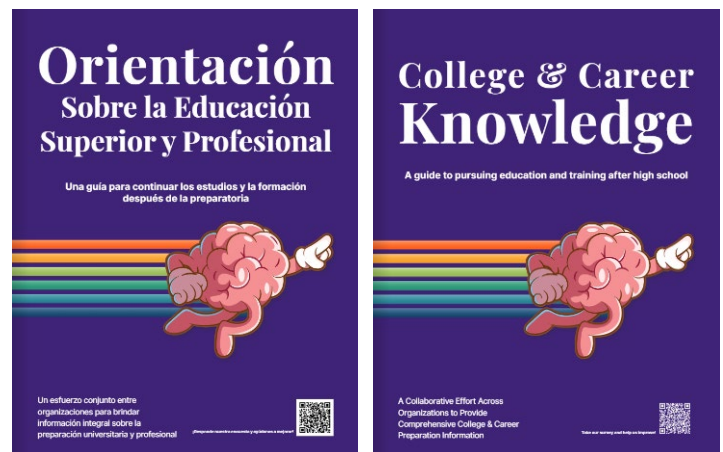
College Bound and WA Grant Informational Videos

WSAC staff partnered with the [North Central Educational Service District](#) (NCESD) to create informational videos that increase student and family awareness of and familiarity with College Bound and WA Grant. Trusted messengers can share these videos with students and families, and accompanying lesson plans offer guidance on how they can leverage the videos to support families' ongoing learning.



College and Career Knowledge Booklet

The College and Career Knowledge booklet is a comprehensive guide that helps Washington State high school students plan for education and training after graduation, grade by grade and month by month. In 2023, the booklet went through a massive redesign, informed by agency and partner organization work groups. Today's booklet, which CAI distributes, is more responsive to students' cultural and social needs.



The [online version](#), which is available in six languages, had over 6,500 views within eight months of launching. Trusted messengers can also access free lesson plans and order print copies of the booklet in either Spanish or English.

How We Innovate: A Spotlight on Regionalization

WSAC understands that regional approaches to college and financial aid outreach have the potential to fast-track progress in communities—look no further than [GEAR UP](#) and [Regional Challenge Grants](#). CAI is also establishing regional approaches to college and financial aid outreach. Several key strategies include:

- A CAI team member serves as a regional outreach officer in Eastern Washington, bringing financial aid expertise into their local community.
- Regional OtterBot pilots will leverage local knowledge to enhance the chatbot's effectiveness.
- Ongoing collaborations with Regional Challenge Grant partnerships ensure that WSAC's regional partners benefit from all that the agency has to offer.

These regional strategies, when combined with CAI's ongoing efforts to increase college and financial aid awareness, will help more students to access *affordable* postsecondary pathways that fit their goals.

We Partner with Schools and Organizations Across the State

Aberdeen School District
Adna School District
Amazon Future Engineer Scholarship
AmeriCorps
Anacortes School District
Asotin-Anatone School District
Association of Washington School Principals
Auburn School District
Bellevue School District
Bellingham School District
Bethel School District
Blaine School District
Bremerton School District
Brewster School District
Burlington-Edison School District
Camas School District
Cashmere School District
Castle Rock School District
Central Kitsap School District
Central Valley School District
Centralia School District
Chehalis School District
Cheney School District
Chewelah School District
City of Seattle Upward Bound
Cle Elum-Roslyn School District
Clover Park School District
Colfax School District
College Access Now-College Possible
College Place School District
College Success Foundation/Washington College Access Network
Columbia (Walla Walla) School District
Columbia Basin College
Community Center for Education Results
Coulee-Hartline School District
Council of Presidents
Crescent School District
Davenport School District
Dayton School District
East Valley (Spokane) School District
East Valley (Yakima) School District
Edmonds School District
Education Talent Search Tacoma Community College
Ephrata School District
ESD 123
Everett School District
Evergreen (Vancouver) School District
Evergreen School District (Clark)
Federal Student Aid
Federal Way School District
Ferndale School District
Fife School District
Finley School District
Franklin Pierce School District
Freeman School District
FuturesNW
GEAR UP
Get Schooled
Goldendale School District
Granger School District
Grays Harbor College
Green River College
Highline Public Schools
Hilltop Artists
Hockinson School District
Hoquiam School District
Inchelium School District
Independent Colleges of Washington
Kelso School District
Kennewick School District
Kent School District
Kettle Falls School District
Kiona-Benton City School District
Kittitas School District

What We Do: WSAC's College Access Initiatives (CAI) Division

Klickitat School District
Lake Chelan School District
Lake Washington School District
Lakewood School District
Longview School District
Lopez School District
Lumen Public School
Lummi Tribal Agency
Lynden School District
Mabton School District
Mansfield School District
Marysville School District
Mead School District
Medical Lake School District
Mercer Island School District
Meridian School District
Methow Valley School District
Metropolitan Development Council
Monroe School District
Montesano School District
Morton School District
Moses Lake School District
Mossyrock School District
Mount Adams School District
Mount Vernon School District
Muckleshoot Indian Tribe
Mukilteo School District
Naselle-Grays River Valley School District
National Association for College Admission
Counseling
Newport School District
Nine Mile Falls School District
Nooksack School District
North Beach School District
North Central Educational Service District
North Franklin School District
North Kitsap School District
North Mason School District
North Thurston High School
North Thurston Public Schools
Northshore School District
Oak Harbor School District
Oakesdale School District
Oakville School District
Ocean Beach School District
Odessa School District
Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction
Okanogan School District
Olympia School District
Omak School District
Onalaska School District
Orting School District
Othello School District
Pacific Northwest Association for College
Admission Counseling
Pasco School District
Pateros School District
Peninsula School District
Pierce College
Prosser School District
Puget Sound College and Career Network
Pullman School District
Puyallup School District
Renton School District
Richland School District
Riverside School District
Riverview School District
Rochester School District
Rosalia School District
Royal School District
Saint Martin's University
Scholar Fund
Seattle Public Schools
Selah School District
Sequim School District
Shelton School District

What We Do: WSAC's College Access Initiatives (CAI) Division

Shoreline School District
Snohomish School District
South Bend School District
South Kitsap School District
South Puget Sound Community College
Spokane International Academy
Spokane Public Schools
Stanwood-Camano School District
State Board for Community and Technical Colleges
Stevenson-Carson School District
Sultan School District
Summer Search
Summit Public School: Olympus
Summit Public School: Sierra
Sumner School District
Sumner-Bonney Lake School District
Sunnyside School District
Swift Student
Tacoma Public Schools
Tahoma School District
Toledo School District
Tonasket School District
Toppenish School District
TRIO at Centralia College
Trout Lake School District
Tukwila School District
Tumwater High School
Tumwater School District
University of Washington GEAR UP
University of Washington Upward Bound
University Place School District
Vancouver School District
WA Passport to Careers
Wahkiakum School District
Wahluke School District
Walla Walla Community College
Walla Walla School District
Wapato School District
Warden School District
Washington College Grant Apprenticeships
Washington Governor's Office
Washington Guaranteed Admission Program
Washington School Counselors Association
Washington State Opportunity Scholarship
Washington State University GEAR UP
Washougal School District
Washtucna School District
Waterville School District
Wenatchee School District
West Valley (Spokane) School District
White Pass School District
White Salmon Valley School District
Wilbur School District
Willapa Valley School District
Willow Public Charter School
Wilson Creek School District
Wishkah Valley School District
Woodland School District
Yakima School District
Yelm School District
Zillah School District

About WSAC's College Access Initiatives Division

Members of the College Access Initiatives (CAI) division serve as the state's trusted and reliable subject matter experts on college access and financial aid. CAI provides a statewide infrastructure for increasing postsecondary access and enrollment for students, families, and the communities in which they live. In this infrastructure, CAI seeks to support all Washington high school students in culturally and regionally responsive ways, especially those who are low-income and/or racially minoritized.

CAI is intentionally responsive to ongoing changes in financial aid systems, colleges and training programs, and the communities where learners live. The division has developed strategic college access initiatives across the state, including: creating awareness for the [College Bound](#) program, utilizing the AI-informed [OtterBot](#) chatbot to engage students and families about pathways after high school, working with trusted messengers to increase FAFSA/WASFA completion rates with the [12th Year Campaign](#), and partnering with other state agencies to support FAFSA completion through [Aim Higher Washington](#).



Where to Find Us

- [Sign up](#) for CAI's listserv to get up to date information and resources.
- Reach out to CAI's 12th Year Campaign to [register](#) your community or school financial aid event.
- Encourage your students and their parents to [sign up](#) for OtterBot, a free chatbot that helps navigate the college and financial aid application process!
- Share WSAC's informational videos on [WA Grant](#) and [College Bound](#)!
- [Order](#) College Access Initiative's materials for your students and families!
- Share the College and Career Knowledge [handouts](#) and use the [student lesson plans](#)!

About the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC)

The Washington Student Achievement Council is committed to increasing educational opportunities and attainment in Washington. The Council has three main functions:

- Lead statewide strategic planning to increase educational attainment.
- Administer programs that help people access and pay for college.
- Advocate for the economic, social, and civic benefits of higher education.

The Council has ten members. Four members represent each of Washington's major education sectors: four-year public baccalaureates, four-year private colleges, public community and technical colleges, and K-12 public schools. Six are citizen members, including two current students (one graduate student and one undergraduate student).

If you would like copies of this document in an alternative format, please contact the Washington Student Achievement Council at:

Mail:

P.O. Box 43430

Olympia, WA 98504-3430

Phone:

360-753-7800

TTY/TDD users may dial 7-1-1 for relay services



**WASHINGTON STUDENT
ACHIEVEMENT COUNCIL**
EDUCATION › OPPORTUNITY › RESULTS