



AIDING ATTAINMENT

Leveraging State Financial Aid FOR ACCESS AND SUCCESS

Aid as an Entitlement in Washington

Washington state has a robust framework for student financial aid, with an emphasis on equity, regional partnerships, and a variety of postsecondary pathways. Leaders in Washington recognized that in order to meet the state's attainment goal, they could not focus solely on traditional students enrolling at two- or four-year institutions. The state's aid programs needed to be broadly accessible and fund both traditional and workforce-focused postsecondary education programs.

In 2019, the state replaced a former need-based program with the [Washington College Grant](#) (WA Grant). The WA grant can be used by recent high school graduates, adults and working learners, undocumented students, and part-time or full-time students. The WA Grant goes beyond traditional two- and four-year colleges; in addition to the dozens of public and private colleges where the grant can be used, students can also choose to use it to fund an approved certificate program, job training, or apprenticeship.

The WA Grant is an entitlement, guaranteeing students whose families meet the income thresholds receive enough funds to pay for tuition and fees at a public college or university in the state (and a portion of tuition at private colleges). The award amounts are generous and are designed to provide enough aid, in combination with the Pell Grant, to cover non-tuition expenses for the lowest-income students. The grant also reaches middle income students who are not Pell-eligible. Students from a family of four with an income up to \$120,000 will receive some money for college. The previous need-based grant would run out of money every year, leaving many qualified students without aid in the years preceding the implementation of the WA Grant.¹ The state invested significantly in the new grant to guarantee eligible students will receive funding and students are encouraged to apply early, but are reassured it's never too late to apply.



¹ Long, K. (2019). *110,000 Washington students a year will get money for college, many a free ride*. The Seattle Times. <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/110000-washington-students-a-year-will-get-money-for-college-many-a-free-ride/>



Washington is designing innovative ways to remove barriers to access to aid and communicate with students. The state offers an AI chatbot, called OtterBot, to provide 24/7 financial aid support. The free texting service sends messages about financial aid and students or parents and guardians can text any time for help. In 2021, the state began automatically enrolling eligible students in the College-Bound Scholarship, which provides an early commitment to the WA Grant and some additional aid for expenses beyond tuition for low-income students who are on free or reduced price lunch.² Washington passed another law in 2024 to remove the burden of applying for financial aid for low-income students. Under HB 2214, students who are eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) will automatically qualify for state need-based aid without having to complete an application.³ While the state is still determining the details of how the automatic qualification will work, the idea is to connect systems on the back-end so that low-income students do not have to keep providing the same information to multiple systems. Washington is also exploring ways to connect financial aid to the state's direct admissions initiative so that students would be notified of their financial aid awards along with their automatic college admissions.

Washington is a diverse state that serves many distinct regional communities, rural communities and communities with high populations of

languages other than English spoken at home. While these policy changes are critical, policy change alone will not lead to an equal uptake of financial aid or an equitable shift in post secondary attainment. In 2022, the state established the Regional Challenge Grant, a bipartisan effort to invest in community-driven, cross-sector regional partnerships to increase postsecondary education access and attainment. Though not restricted to aid access, many of the innovations coming from the grantees champion community-specific ways to support learners as they navigate financial aid access and make decisions about postsecondary education, such as Tacoma's Campaign Free Aid or Yakima Valley's efforts to connect Spanish-speaking families with tax preparers *before* providing support for financial aid applications—a sequencing that directly responds to the community's needs.⁴ The state hopes that by centering its investments in regional partnerships, regional learning can become statewide learning that leads to policies and practices that better and more equitably serve the state's learners.

Washington's comprehensive approach to student financial aid positions it as a leader in educational accessibility. By continually innovating and removing barriers to aid, Washington is ensuring that all students, regardless of background, have the opportunity to pursue higher education and achieve their academic and career goals.

Check out the full suite of *Aiding Attainment* resources, including the state aid benchmarking tool, state spotlights, student aid scenarios, and more at edstrategy.org/resource/aiding-attainment.

2 Washington Student Achievement Council. (2023). *College Bound Scholarship: Automatic Enrollment Expands Access to Financial Aid for Washington's Low-Income Students*. <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2023%20CBS%20Auto-Enrollment%20Brief.pdf>

3 Deng, G. (2024). *Guaranteed College Financial Aid Coming To Wa Students On Food Assistance*. Washington State Standard. <https://washingtonstatestandard.com/2024/04/23/guaranteed-college-financial-aid-coming-to-wa-students-on-food-assistance>

4 Washington Student Achievement Council. (n.d.). *Regional Challenge Grants*. <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/Regional%20Challenge%20Grants%20Framework.pdf>