

Washington Virtual Academies

Tacoma, Washington

School district-based virtual public school brings personalized and flexible tuition-free online learning to K–12 students across the state of Washington

Washington Virtual Academies (WAVA) partnered with Omak School District in 2010 to provide tuition-free fully online learning to kindergarten through 12th grade students across Washington. Both full-time and part-time enrollment options are available. Students choose WAVA for a variety of reasons, including the convenience and flexibility of online learning, as well as to take advantage of accelerated and advanced learning options, extracurricular pursuits, a safer learning environment, and to accommodate scheduling needs dictated by medical conditions, sports, or employment. In the 2020–2021 school year, WAVA served 8,145 students.

WAVA, Omak School District, and Stride work in close partnership, each contributing key components to the school's program. Stride provides the comprehensive online curriculum and the administrative and instructional support staff, while the school district provides all of the online teachers.

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Thousands of Washington students have succeeded because of the wide range of options and flexibility offered by the school. Summer Shelton, WAVA Head of School, shared, "Our data shows that WAVA is closing the opportunity gaps that exist for families who are traditionally underserved, including socioeconomic status, home-based language, ethnicity, and special education."

How does WAVA Online Learning Work?

Students may enroll in WAVA as a full-time or part-time student. The educational program is different for each type, as well as for elementary, middle, and high school students, as shown in the table below.

SCHOOL

Type of school:

Full-time online public school

Grades served:

K–12

Program started:

2010

Students served by program (2020–2021):

8,145 Total

3,248 Elementary

2,759 Middle

2,138 High

Ethnicity:

70.21% White

16.46% Multiple/other

7.33% Hispanic

6.00% Black

Free/Reduced-price lunch:

31.72%

Staff:

Staff provided by Stride:

1 Head of School

4 Principals

7 Assistant Principals

3 School Psychologists

23 Advisors

14 Administrative staff

Staff provided by school district:

Teachers, including special education teachers, for online learning

Instructional model:

Full-time and part-time online learning

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Washington Virtual Academies, a program of Omak School District, is a fully online public school offering full-time and part-time learning options to K–12 students across the state of Washington.

Stride provides the online curriculum and the administrative staff, and the Omak School District provides the teachers who teach the online courses.

WAVA offers supplemental programs to support each student's unique needs, including English language supports, learning assistance, special education, Highly Capable electives, and 504 Plan supports.

WAVA's graduation rate of 91.8% is higher than the state's graduation rate of 83%.

WAVA's dropout rate was 0% in the 2020–2021 school year.

Course Requirements for WAVA students

	Full-Time Student	Part-Time Student
Elementary school	English Language Arts, mathematics, history, science, art, and physical education	Minimum of 2: English Language Arts or math, and science. Optional additions: history, art, PE, electives for Highly Capable' students
Middle school	English Language Arts, mathematics, history, and science	Option 1: English Language Arts and history Option 2: Math and science
High school	Minimum of five courses plus additional courses based on focus and graduation requirements	Any course(s), including Running Start dual college credit

In addition to the mainstream online education program, WAVA offers supplemental programs to support each student's unique needs, including English language supports, learning assistance, special education, advanced Highly Capable student electives, and 504 supports.

A typical day for students looks different for younger students as compared to older students. Younger students are normally online for no more than two hours a day, while older students may be online for up to six hours a day. Students participate in live virtual sessions for real-time instruction, teacher-student interaction, and collaboration. Some students may attend live sessions for several hours each day while others choose to attend less often based on what they need to be successful.

In addition to online lessons and live sessions, students conduct science experiments, read books, work on projects individually or collaboratively, and join small group lessons along with other students. Scheduling for these activities is dependent on students' availability, as WAVA wants to preserve the flexible nature of their learning environment. One enrollment option, for example, called the Flex program, allows students to choose to interact a little less with teachers and fellow students to accommodate unique scheduling challenges. Students on a regimented medical treatment program, for example, can create a schedule that meets their specific requirements.

Stride provides laptops to students as well as vouchers to qualifying families to help pay for internet service.

The Stride online curriculum and delivery platform is used by WAVA to offer a full array of course options to Washington students in grades K–12. Stride provides laptops to students as well as vouchers to qualifying families to help pay for internet service. Additional supplies, such as books, workbooks, microscopes, and other science-related lab equipment, as well as paint, paint brushes, and other supplies for art classes, are shipped directly to students by Stride.

High school students can participate in Running Start, a dual enrollment and dual credit program for 11th and 12th grade students to take college courses at any of Washington's 34 community and technical colleges, Central Washington University, Eastern Washington University, Northwest Indian College, Washington State University, and The Evergreen State College. Participants receive high school and college credit while taking classes on the campus of participating colleges. Running Start gives high school juniors and seniors the option to attend college either full-time or part-time while concurrently earning high school and college credit.

WAVA encourages students to exercise and play each day. Most students are engaged in extracurricular activities, such as practicing piano or attending fencing practice. Because learning is 100% online for WAVA students, in-person interactions are limited to specific situations, such as state assessments, field trips, and other planned events. Planned events might include lunch chats, show-and-tell, dance parties, and more. WAVA also offers a wealth of student clubs, from art and baking, to travel and music. Faculty advisors are available to provide support and guidance to clubs and student groups.

Omak School District and Stride Partnership Spells Success

WAVA's online teachers are employees of Omak School District. When teachers are first assigned to WAVA, they attend two to four days of synchronous and asynchronous training to help them adapt to WAVA's online systems and teaching platform. New teachers are assigned a mentor who is an experienced online instructor, and the teachers engage in an intense mentoring program that lasts a full year. Stride also partners with Southern New Hampshire University to provide a master's program for WAVA teachers interested in earning a master's degree in online education.

In addition to interacting with students during online courses and analyzing and monitoring student activities, teachers also host 5 to 15 live session teaching hours per week. Expectations are quite different for a WAVA teacher as compared to a brick-and-mortar teacher. As Summer Shelton, WAVA's Head of School emphasized, "In our model, teachers do not teach live as much as someone in a place-based school; however, there are a number of things place-based teachers are not asked to do, such as course manipulation, which makes the learning more meaningful for each and every student." Teachers are given extra time for planning, and they must take time to document interactions with their students. Teachers are required to participate in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, grade student work, and engage in professional learning communities that focus on Dufour's Four Questions:

- What do we want all students to know and be able to do?
- How will we know if they learn?
- How will we respond when some students do not learn?
- How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient?

This work is focused on essential standards that students need to learn, and WAVA teachers collect data to answer the questions using formative assessments. The teachers then use that data to best serve each student.

Partnership Results in Fabric of Support

Instructional support staff comprised of both Stride and school district educators form a rich fabric of support for students, families, as well as WAVA's teachers and administrators.

Student advisors from Stride provide technical and extracurricular support. Shelton explained, "When students or their families have questions, they know they can go to teachers as well as advisors. Teachers are there for instruction and content, and advisors are there for technical and extracurricular support."

Special education teachers from the school district provide support for special education students.

Resource coordinators from Stride serve as WAVA's equivalent to a school social worker and support students with social-emotional learning, community resources, and additional supports as needed on a case-by-case basis.

504 Plan coordinators from Stride work with teachers and families to ensure qualified students receive the services and supports identified in 504 Plans, as well as providing staff support and training.

School psychologists from Stride help students and families assess the need for additional support options available at WAVA, such as special education and 504 Plan services.

Home-based learning coaches provide support to younger students. They are typically a parent or guardian at home, or sometimes grandparents or caregivers within the student's family structure or in their community. Learning coaches monitor progress and help students with such things as preparing for each day's learning, printing out items that will be needed during live sessions, checking progress on assignments, getting books ready for read-alouds, and more.

How are Student Outcomes Measured?

Washington Virtual Academies measures results using a combination of factors, both quantitative and qualitative.

Based on enrollment and completion data, WAVA is increasingly closing opportunity gaps for underserved students, including socioeconomic status, home-based language, ethnicity, and special education.

Many students who are on specially designed instructional programs are outperforming students in general education, and because of that, the school continually hears praise from parents.

The school's IEP accommodations are making students' learning environments and processes more equitable, comfortable, and safe, contributing to a remarkable school dropout rate of zero percent for the 2020-2021 school year.

WAVA's graduate rate of 91.8% is 10.6% higher than the state's graduation rate of 83%.

From a qualitative point of view, Shelton related a story about a parent whose son was on the autism spectrum and was nonverbal most of the time. After about a month of online school, a neighbor reached out to ask the parent if they had found a new therapy to enhance their son's verbal ability. The neighbor said that they noticed the child was really opening up, playing in the yard, and saying hello to everyone. The parent told the neighbor that they were trying online school because they noticed it was relieving some of their son's anxiety. "This is the impact that online school can have on the whole child, not just the academics," said Shelton.

Notes

1 Washington's Highly Capable Program is a component of the state's education program to accelerate learning for young learners identified as Highly Capable, which are those who perform or show potential for performing at significantly advanced academic levels compared with others of their age, experiences, or environments.