Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

UPDATE: Running Start Data 2026

Authorizing Legislation: RCW 28A.600.402

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As demonstrated by the Education Research and Data Center's (ERDC) Annual Report on Dual Credit, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges' (SBCTC) Enrollment Data Dashboard, and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's (OSPI) Washington State Report Card, Running Start enrollment slowed during and immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic, but has rebounded to exceed pre-pandemic levels. The 37,036 Running Start students reported in fall 2025 is the highest total ever and reflects a 7.1% increase from the fall 2024 school year.

In the summer of 2025, the Running Start headcount increased 40% from 2024, the first year in which summer Running Start was fully implemented under the 1.40 annual average full-time equivalent (AAFTE) limit. In 2026, summer enrollment rose another 19.3% from 8,633 to 10,303. The students enrolled accounted for a full-time equivalent (FTE) of 4,960, equating to 74,400 college credits (an increase of over 19.5% from 2025).

The Legislature's investment in Running Start has provided many students with an invaluable opportunity to get a head start on their postsecondary pursuits, and they are taking advantage of it by enrolling in higher numbers and for more credits. The added flexibility afforded by the increase to a 1.40 FTE limit and the opening of summer quarter Running Start resulted in a noteworthy increase in enrollment and the number of credits attempted (based on FTE). To achieve this, multiple agencies collaborated closely to quickly implement summer quarter Running Start, redesign policies, and practices to respond to a new FTE limitation and provide extensive guidance and professional development. The cross-sector partnership demonstrated throughout the process is indicative of a strong, shared commitment between K–12, higher education, and non-governmental organizations, to increase equitable access to quality dual credit programs for ready and interested students.

INTRODUCTION

This annual report examines statewide Running Start enrollment for school year (SY) 2025–26, as required by Substitute House Bill (SHB) 1316 (1)(4) and codified in Revised Code of Washington (RCW) 28A.600.402(4) (Running start program—Funding levels—Report).

Disaggregated data for the 2023–24, 2024–25, and 2025–26 school years is presented in the accompanying data tables, and longitudinal data from a variety of other sources was utilized to provide additional context. The sources utilized in this report include OSPI's Comprehensive Education and Data Research System (CEDARS), OSPI apportionment data, SBCTC's Enrollment Data Dashboard, and four-year baccalaureate institutions' Public Centralized Higher Education Enrollment System (PCHEES) data compiled by ERDC. Much of the data provided is also available through the Dual Credit dashboard of OSPI's Washington State Report Card.

Important Note: The data provided in the report and data tables reflect a one-time snapshot of enrollment and credit earning based on district and college reporting to date. Some localized discrepancies were expected due to the timing of this report. The data tables will be updated and reposted on OSPI's Course-Based Dual Credit webpage when additional information is available.

BACKGROUND

In 2021–22, the Running Start program experienced its first enrollment decline in over a decade. This was due, in large part, to pandemic-related school and college closures and the impact of these interruptions on students' advanced course-taking. Additionally, some students whose early high school years were disrupted chose to stay in high school to experience a more traditional junior and senior year instead of accessing Running Start. At community and technical colleges, according to SBCTC's Enrollment Data Dashboard, enrollment declined 14% from 2020 to 2021 before rebounding modestly in 2022, nearly returning to pre-pandemic levels in 2023, and exceeding them in 2024.

Amid that recovery, the Legislature passed SHB 1316 (2023), raising the combined maximum enrollment in Running Start to 1.40 AAFTE and opening the summer college term to Running Start students. In 2024, eligibility for summer quarter Running Start was formally extended to students completing the 10th grade ("rising juniors") through Substitute Senate Bill (SSB) 5670. Including the "after-exit" proviso (first introduced in 2022 but not reauthorized in 2025) which also funded summer Running Start for graduating seniors and those who exceeded the 1.40 AAFTE limit, the Legislature's investment in Running Start was generous and well-timed.

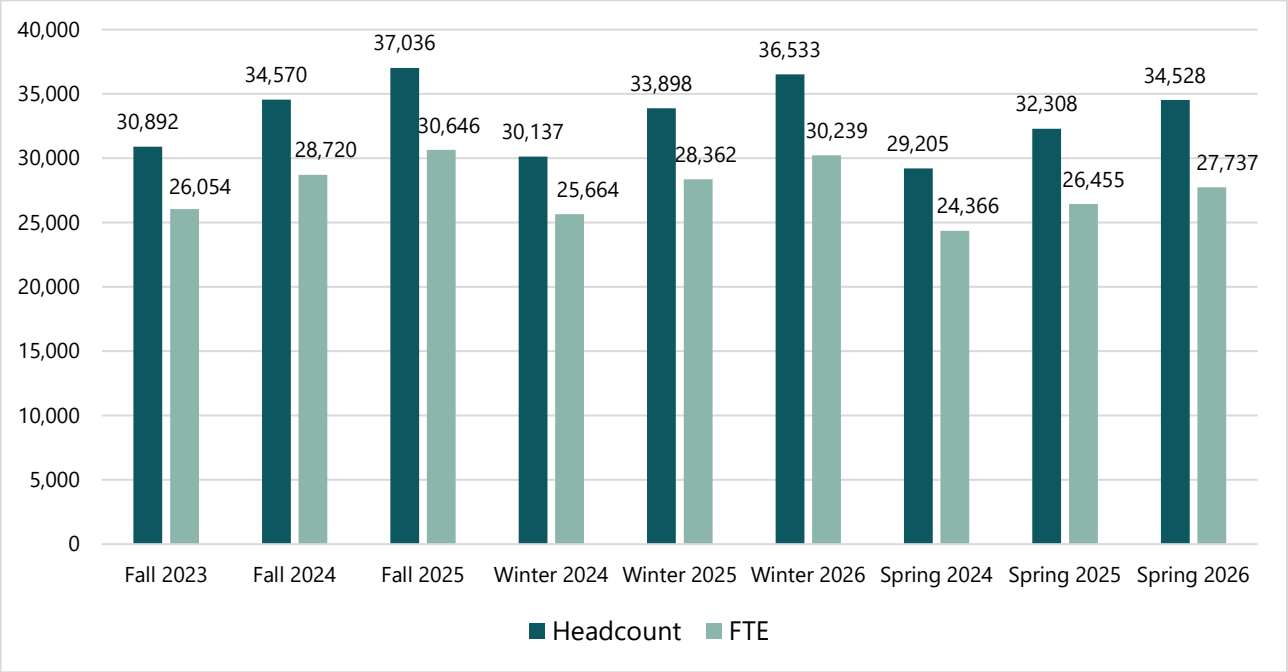
Included in SHB 1316 was a requirement that OSPI would collaborate with higher education partners, the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC), and the ERDC on annual tracking of the combined FTE experience of students participating in Running Start programs, including course load analyses and disaggregation by high schools and institutions of higher education eligible to offer Running Start. These institutions, whether public four-year colleges and universities or community and technical colleges, will be referred to as "colleges" throughout the report. This report aims to satisfy this requirement and provide recommendations for additional policy and funding options that can further support the Legislature's intention to ensure equitable access to dual credit opportunities.

STATEWIDE UPDATE

Running Start Participation During the School Year (September to June)

2023–26 Headcounts, FTE, and Attempted Credits

Figure 1: K–12 Running Start Average Monthly Headcount and FTE



Source: Form P-223, OSPI School Apportionment/Financial Services Division, August 31, 2026.

Figure 1 shows sustained year-over-year growth in both average monthly Running Start headcount and FTE across every term. Fall headcount has increased nearly 20% in the last three years – from 30,892 in 2023 to 37,036 in 2025. Fall FTE has increased 17.6% over the same period. Although enrollment and FTE continue to expand in each term, the lower growth rates in the most recent year indicate that the pace of growth has slowed after the larger gains recorded immediately after the passage of SHB 1316, which raised the Running Start enrollment limit to 1.40 AAFTE.

The 37,036 students enrolled in Running Start in the fall of 2025 reflected in Figure 1 was the highest total ever and 7.1% higher than the previous year. Running Start enrollment traditionally declines from fall to spring each year, but as demonstrated in SBCTC's Enrollment Data Dashboard, each term's respective enrollment has increased annually since 2022–23 at community and technical colleges and, in 2025–26, the headcount was up 8.7% and FTE up 7.5% from the previous year.

In alignment with the community college quarter system, headcounts and FTE are disaggregated by high school (566) and college (36) in the accompanying data tables. At the time of publication, some

four-year colleges' summer 2026 enrollment had not been reported in PCHEES. Minor inconsistencies between K–12 and college counts are typically due to differences in the timing of the data extraction and the fact that K–12 enrollment data is reflected in monthly averages.

Figure 2: Running Start Credits Attempted, by College

Organization Name	Credits Attempted for Fall 2025	Credits Attempted for Winter 2026	Credits Attempted for Spring 2026
Bates	83	67	76
Bellevue	45,485	45,643	42,270
Bellingham	1,417	1,426	1,331
Big Bend	8,617	8,662	7,878
Cascadia	15,345	15,388	14,364
Centralia	7,519	7,739	7,451
Clark	26,169	25,338	22,755
Clover Park	3,228	3,434	2,826
Columbia Basin	26,620	26,612	23,586
Edmonds	16,773	16,793	14,460
Everett	19,784	19,124	17,402
Grays Harbor	6,877	6,766	6,348
Green River	35,645	34,711	32,226
Highline	20,262	20,308	18,851
Lake Washington	2,687	2,533	2,306
Lower Columbia	7,281	7,307	6,700
Olympic	20,139	20,277	18,936
Peninsula	4,503	4,289	3,934
Pierce	34,827	32,177	29,631

Renton	1,902	2,140	1,831
Seattle Central/SVI	7,855	6,244	6,144
Seattle North	6,334	6,338	5,172
Seattle South	6,791	6,997	6,362
Shoreline	4,331	4,731	3,754
Skagit Valley	10,937	10,963	9,873
South Puget Sound	20,633	20,523	18,385
Spokane	12,583	12,135	11,156
Spokane Falls	13,137	12,600	11,401
Tacoma	18,005	17,193	16,144
Walla Walla	4,388	4,248	3,894
Wenatchee Valley	13,226	12,657	11,606
Whatcom	11,760	11,323	10,166
Yakima Valley	13,290	13,020	12,013
Central Washington University	3,016	2,898	2,443
Eastern Washington University	6,754	6,494	5,792
Washington State University *	2,036		1,665
Total	**460,236**	**449,098**	**411,132**

Source: For community and technical colleges, SBCTC Enrollment Data Dashboard, September 2026. For four-year baccalaureate colleges and universities, PCHEES, as obtained through data sharing with ERDC, September 2026.

In 2025–26, Running Start students averaged 440,155 (up 5.9% from 2024-25) attempted college credits each term, which is equivalent to 88,031 five-credit courses. When divided by the average quarterly headcount (36,032), it appears that students average about 2.4 Running Start classes per term, equating to roughly 12 college credits or 2.4 high school credits per quarter. While the average

* As a semester system, Washington State University does not report winter enrollment data.

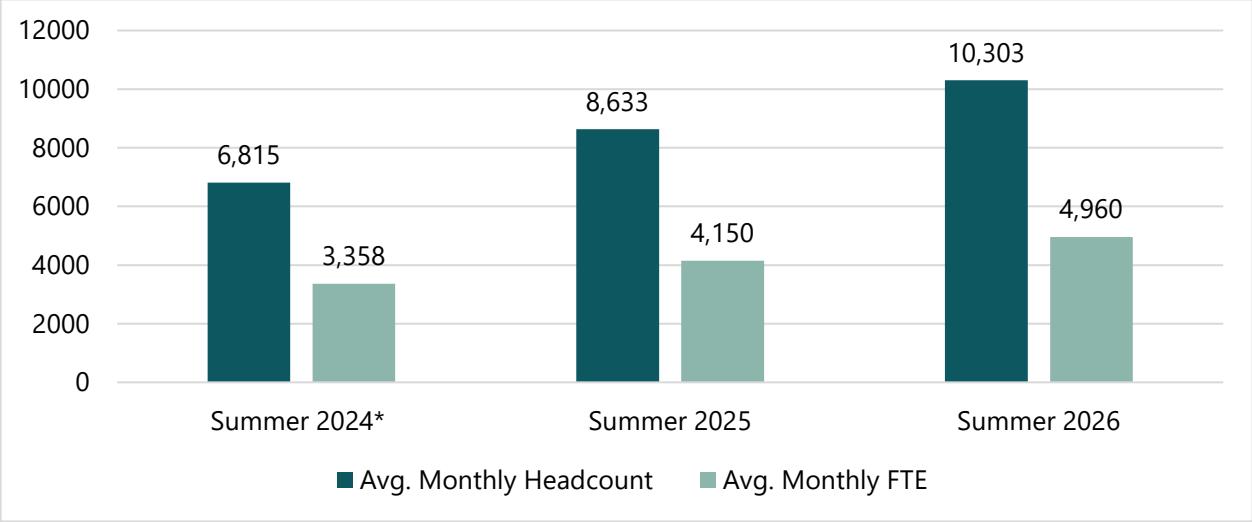
headcount and attempted credits increased 7.3% and 5.9%, respectively, from 2024–25 to 2025–26, students' average courseload remained the same.

Due to limitations in how Running Start course-taking is reported and stored in CEDARS, attempted credits cannot be attributed to individual schools; however, they are disaggregated by district (272) in the accompanying data tables.

Summer Running Start Participation

Summer 2024-2026 Headcounts, FTE, and Attempted Credits

Figure 3: Summer 2024-2026 Headcounts and FTE



Source: Form P-223 (December 2024, October 2025, and September 2026) and After-Exit Funding Report (December 2024), OSPI School Apportionment/Financial Services Division.

In 2024, summer quarter enrollment increased almost fivefold with the introduction of the 1.40 FTE limitation, inclusion of rising juniors, and participation of public four-year institutions which were not included in the "after-exit" proviso. Although the "after-exit" proviso was not reauthorized in 2025, "standard" (FTE-based) summer Running Start was well established with the switch to a 1.40 FTE maximum. Seniors were permitted to delay their high school graduation to participate if they had not met the FTE limitation, leading to a 27% increase in headcount.

In 2026, the summer Running Start headcount and FTE rose another 19.3% and 19.5%, respectively. The 4,960 FTE in 2026 equates to 74,400 college credits, averaging to approximately 14,880 five-credit summer courses. Based on the headcount of 10,303, students took an average of 7.2 college credits in the summer term, equivalent to 1.4 courses per student — both averages identical to 2025. With a maximum of 10 college credits available, there appears to be a healthy balance between those who are taking full advantage of the opportunity and those who opt to take a lighter courseload due to other summer commitments and/or the compressed timeline of the summer term.

[*] Summer 2024 includes "after-exit" enrollment/FTE not included in accompanying data tables.

CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

Running Start enrollment has increased since the pandemic and reached a new high-water mark in 2025–26, largely due to legislative support that expanded student participation and added flexibility to course scheduling. Fall 2025 enrollment reached a record of 37,036 students, 7.1% higher than the previous year. Overall growth is attributed to the increase in the FTE limit from 1.20 to 1.40, allowing students to exceed 1.0 FTE at their colleges, the expansion of summer quarter Running Start, and inclusion of rising juniors and seniors delaying graduation.

In 2025–26, Running Start students averaged 440,155 attempted college credits per term, a 5.9% increase from 2024–25. Average quarterly headcount increased 7.3% to 36,032, while the average course load remained approximately 12 college credits each quarter. These results show that recent growth reflects broader participation rather than a substantial increase in the average course load.

With respect to summer quarter Running Start, enrollment increased from 8,633 students in 2025 to 10,303 in 2026, a 19.3% gain. Summer FTE rose 19.5%. As in 2025, students averaged 7.2 college credits, or 1.4 courses, during the summer term. Although gains of this magnitude may moderate as the program moves beyond its initial implementation and is impacted by the shift to a 1.30 AAFTE limit, the 2026 results establish a stronger benchmark for future projections.

While the 2025–26 data points are promising, the program is not without limitations. The rapid growth associated with the 1.40 FTE limit, the opening of summer quarter, and the inclusion of rising juniors and seniors delaying graduation has put a strain on high schools, districts, and colleges and exacerbated existing challenges. High school counselors and staff are managing an increasingly large population of Running Start students (including unfamiliar private and homeschool students) through outdated enrollment and apportionment processes while retaining only 7% of their basic education allocation (BEA). In addition, the college registration period conflicts with the busiest time of the school year and students participate during a summer term in which high schools are not staffed, leading to challenges in communication, paperwork completion and routing, summer FTE reporting, and reimbursement.

With the added complexity of advising Running Start students through changing eligibility criteria and enrollment limits and the amount of work required to serve private, homeschool, and graduating students as well, there is a noteworthy increase in the number of concerns being raised by school and district staff about the purpose of Running Start in relation to K–12 learning standards, graduation requirements, and the role of school counselors or other designated staff in administering the program. There is a growing and more vocal contingent questioning whether Running Start is too permissive and intentionally focused more on driving students to college than helping them meet high school learning standards and graduation requirements. These concerns are often evident in efforts to limit students' participation through Running Start contracts, form submission deadlines, credit equivalency practices, facility or technology restrictions, preferential support for College in the High School, and other practices OSPI is actively trying to mitigate as demonstrated in Bulletin No. 030-26 and annual revisions to the Frequently Asked Questions. When OSPI identifies, intervenes, or

provides guidance on practices limiting or discouraging participation, Running Start administrators frequently note that there is a growing rift between K–12 and higher education fueled by tension surrounding Running Start and a perceived lack of support for other high school-based dual credit options. In addition, school and district administrators often cite significant challenges in master scheduling, budgeting, and hiring due to the uncertainty of school enrollment caused by Running Start and the misalignment of high school and college calendars and enrollment windows.

Next Steps

OSPI recommends the following policy and funding solutions to ensure that schools, districts, and colleges are adequately supported in managing the expansion of the Running Start program, that students and families are provided with equitable and transparent opportunities to participate in it, and that it remains mutually beneficial and sustainable.

Apply a Multiplier to Raise the Running Start Rate: Participation gaps persist among students from historically marginalized groups and low-income families. One of the most significant barriers to participation is the out-of-pocket costs to students. Applying a 6% multiplier to the Running Start rate in the prototypical school funding model to cover tuition, fees, and books would ensure that students are not financially impacted for accessing their basic education through college coursework while ensuring participating colleges have the funding to address their operational needs. Even though students are not charged tuition, they are responsible for course fees, books, and other costs that can amount to $400–800 per quarter based on several colleges' estimates and posted fees. A multiplier would also increase efficiency at the state and local levels by eliminating the need to administer fee waiver and subsidy programs. Finally, an increase in the Running Start rate would benefit school districts by increasing the amount they retain to administer Running Start programs and support the recent expansion of Running Start operations into the summer months.

Fund the Two-Count Summer Quarter at 150%: To support college and district implementation of summer Running Start, an enrollment-driven increase to the prototypical school funding model is recommended to raise the summer term Running Start rate to 150% of the standard year rate. This ensures that colleges will receive reimbursement equal to that of the standard school year, and districts will be able to utilize a larger sum from the 7% they retain to support summer operations.

Colleges receive only two-thirds of what they are reimbursed during the standard school year because there are only two summer count days instead of the standard three counts in other terms. According to our higher education partners, their costs are the same in the summer term as they are during the standard school year. For K–12, additional funding has not yet been provided to account for the additional workload incurred by opening summer quarter and expanding access to new categories of students (e.g. rising juniors and seniors delaying graduation).

In 2024, the "after-exit" proviso funded a 30% enhancement to the Running Start rate in the summer months to account for the summer funding gap and nearly two-thirds of the fully expended proviso supported the rate enhancement, leaving little room for enrollment growth. The "after-exit" proviso was not reauthorized in 2025, so that enhancement has not been applied since 2024. In addition, the

130% rate adjustment applied only to colleges and did not provide additional funding to schools and districts that have also incurred additional costs for administering summer Running Start at a time of year when schools are traditionally closed. For these reasons, it is critical that an enrollment-driven rate adjustment be made, rather than a finite allocation to just one sector.

Reauthorization of Dual Credit Proviso Funding: Local education agencies (LEA) need funding to onboard, maintain, expand, and promote dual credit programs. Unlike colleges which receive funding from districts or the state to support and grow dual credit programs, LEAs retain only 7% of BEA for Running Start and receive additional state funding only to administer dual credit exam fee subsidies. Historically, OSPI has administered over $4 million in grants and subsidies in direct support of students and/or LEAs through the $4.89 million dual credit proviso. In 2025, OSPI lost its dual credit funding in addition to the "after-exit" proviso, leaving districts with no dedicated funding to support activities reflected in the Dual Credit Programs/Subsidized Fees proviso report. In 2024–25, 12% of the $2.93 million Consolidated Equity and Sustainability Grant was used on Running Start to subsidize out-of-pocket costs to students and cover summer administrative costs to districts associated with the opening of the summer term.

Funding for Integrated Electronic Tracking and Reporting: Funding must be allocated to establish the technological infrastructure to effectively administer Running Start and reduce student and family barriers to guidance and enrollment. Due to OSPI's antiquated apportionment and enrollment reporting systems, Running Start enrollment and reimbursement processes rely on the submission of hardcopy paperwork and transmission of Excel spreadsheets between high schools and colleges, at times requiring students, school counselors, administrators, and college staff to personally track down people and paperwork to complete the enrollment verification process. These practices are administratively burdensome, inefficient, unsecure, and subject to human error. Given the implementation of summer quarter Running Start, which occurs when high schools are closed and districts are minimally staffed, OSPI and its partners are exploring options for developing or licensing an electronic platform accessible by students, families, K–12 staff, and higher education administrators to digitize, automate, and report on Running Start enrollment and reimbursement. This would increase efficiency and reduce errors across the enrollment and reimbursement systems.

Increase Support for "Vocational" (Career and Technical Education) Running Start: SBCTC and OSPI collaborated on a barrier reduction proposal included in OSPI's 2024 decision package to eliminate out-of-pocket costs to students in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. Annually, only 7–10% of Running Start FTE is in "vocational" (professional technical or workforce) coursework. Despite their proximity to large student populations and prospective business and industry partners, the state's five technical colleges enroll the fewest Running Start students in the community and technical college system. The cost to students is a significant barrier to access, as vocational Running Start courses often require additional fees and specialized equipment and supplies. OSPI and SBCTC have made an effort to promote Running Start in professional technical fields by developing a crosswalk of college Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) codes that may be used to satisfy CTE and graduation pathway requirements. However, additional funding to cover the costs of industry-recognized credentials and CTE-specific needs and costs to students is warranted.

Leverage Cross-Sector Collaboration and Initiatives to Drive Program Improvement: OSPI, SBCTC, ERDC, and the Council of Presidents (COP) recently concluded a seven-state "Next Phase of Dual Enrollment Policy" cohort led by the College in the High School Alliance (CHSA) and National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP). While there is no longer any grant funding to support its efforts, an advisory group of over 25 cross-sector representatives will continue to work towards realizing a statewide vision for dual credit and making progress on aligned priorities that were informed by a comprehensive survey of over 300 dual credit administrators and instructors. Advisory group activities will also seek to align with other initiatives such as the CTE Dual Credit pilot in Educational Service District (ESD) 189, High School and Beyond Plan (HSBP) implementation, and Jobs for the Future (JFF) Big Blur research and grant program.

Specific to Running Start, the agencies and advisory committee will need to prioritize messaging and relationship-building efforts between schools and colleges to improve collaboration and establish shared commitments. Future conversations must center students while acknowledging the challenges facing both sectors to find common ground on questions of funding, credit equivalencies, enrollment timelines and procedures, student support, and master scheduling. SBCTC has applied for grant funding to partner with an independent consultant to lead this and other work, but sustained investment is necessary to support and promote the work of the advisory committee; incentivize practitioner, student, and family engagement in conceptualizing solutions; and develop statewide, cross-sector tools and communication platforms to improve Running Start administration.

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