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College Bound Scholarship: Automatic Enrollment Expands Access to Financial Aid for Washington's Low-Income Students

Established in 2007, the College Bound Scholarship (CBS) is an early commitment of state funding intended to improve high school graduation, college enrollment, and completion rates for low-income students. The program provides awareness of available grant funding designed to alleviate financial barriers that prevent low-income students from considering college.¹

As of Fall 2021, students are automatically enrolled in CBS if they attend a public school and are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) in 7th or 8th grade, or newly eligible in 9th grade. Foster youth, or any youth who is a dependent of the state between 7th grade and high school graduation, are automatically enrolled. Private school and homeschool students can also apply.

In this brief, we detail the history of the policy change and demonstrate its importance as it relates to serving the scholarship's target population. We also provide early descriptive information on how enrollment and uptake have changed since auto-enrollment took effect.²

The College Bound Scholarship Pledge

Even with the transition to automatic enrollment, eligible students must still fulfill the pledge requirements, which include:

- Graduate from a Washington State high school with a 2.0 GPA or higher
- Not be convicted of a felony
- File a financial aid application, either the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) or WASFA (Washington Application for State Financial Aid), during their senior year of high school and each year they attend college to determine their income eligibility.

¹ College Bound was funded at \$34.3 million from the Legislature for the 2021-23 biennium on top of Washington College Grant (WCG) awards. There may be caseload adjustments in the 2023 Supplemental Budget.

² The scholarship combines with the WCG and other state aid to cover the cost of average tuition (at comparable public college rates), some fees, and a small book allowance at over 65 colleges, universities, and technical schools in Washington.

An Equity-Minded Policy Change for an Equity-Minded Scholarship Program

Addressing college access barriers that students of color disproportionately experience is integral to achieving Washington’s statewide attainment goal of 70% of residents aged 25-44 earning a credential. The population of students who receive the College Bound Scholarship—which is targeted at low-income students—are more likely to represent racial/ethnic minority groups than the overall K-12 population in Washington (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Distribution of Washington K-12 Students and Students Who Signed Up for CBS by Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Percent of K-12 Student Population	Percent of CBS Population
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1.3%	1.7%
Asian	7.8%	5.8%
Black/African American	4.4%	7.3%
Hispanic/Latino of any race(s)	23.4%	41.1%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	1.1%	2.2%
Two or More Races	8.8%	7.2%
White	53.1%	34.7%
Grand Total³	100%	100%

However, without auto-enrollment, not all eligible students completed the CBS application. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 30% of the eligible FRPL population did not sign up by the end of 8th grade. Auto-enrollment removes the barrier that prevents eligible students from completing their applications, furthering the capacity of state funding to break down access barriers for populations historically underserved by higher education.

An Existing Outreach Challenge Worsened by the Pandemic

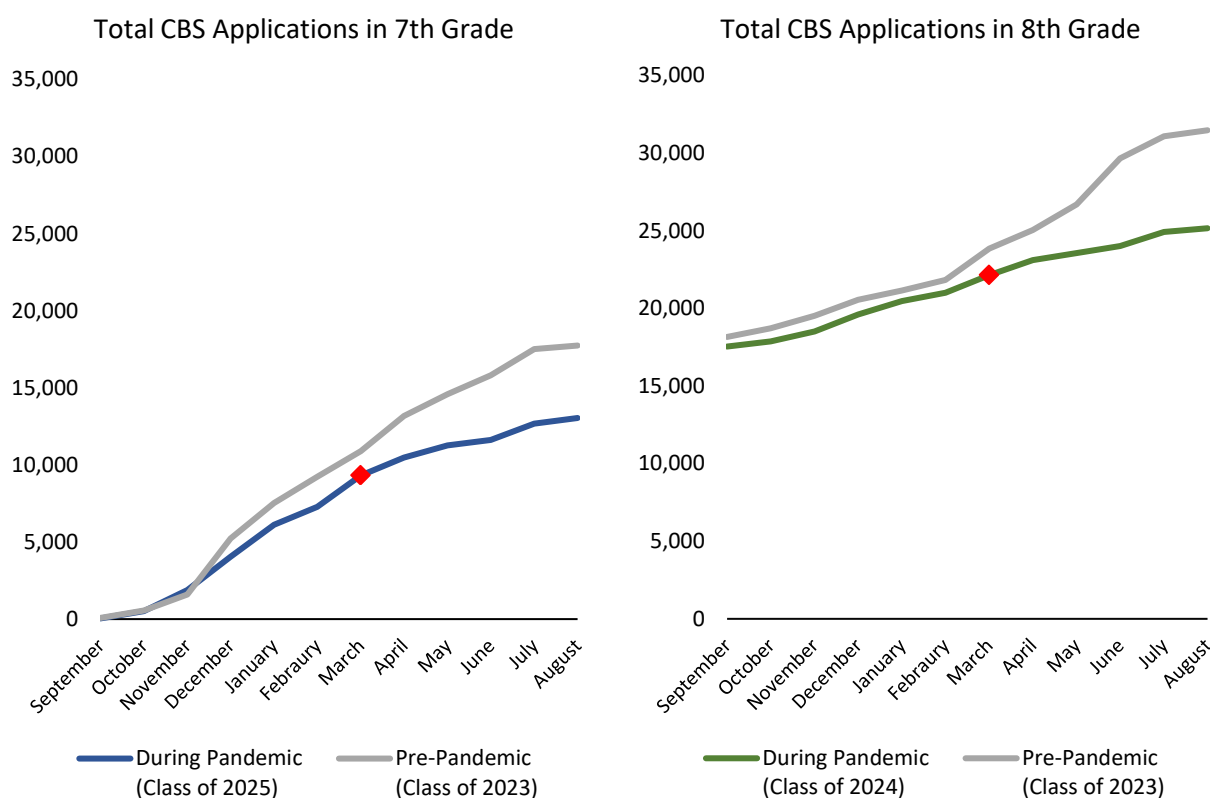
When the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered school buildings in the spring of 2020 and schools transitioned to online learning, an already cumbersome enrollment process became a more pronounced barrier to accessing the College Bound Scholarship. Middle school counselors were forced to work remotely while trying to complete CBS applications, but without in-person face time with students, application counts for eligible classes declined precipitously.

Figure 1 below shows the number of completed CBS applications for the two cohorts impacted by the March 2020 school closures compared to the most recent pre-pandemic cohort (class of 2023 in both instances). The class of 2025 cohort was in 7th grade at the onset of the pandemic

³ Source: OSPI review of WSAC and OSPI student enrollment and CBS application data. Overall K-12 student population includes students whose race is reported to WSAC by OSPI. CBS student population includes 8th grade students who signed up by the end of the 2018-2019 academic year.

and the class of 2024 cohort was in 8th grade. When school closures began in March 2020 (identified by the red diamond on the graphs), each cohort experienced a noticeable slowing of CBS application completions compared to the pre-pandemic cohort. This trend suggests that school closures had a negative effect on CBS application completions.

Figure 1. School building closures in March 2020 led to fewer completed CBS applications than before the pandemic.⁴



In December 2020, Governor Inslee issued a 30-day emergency proclamation that suspended the signature requirement for eligible students to sign up for CBS. Previously, a student and parent/guardian were required to sign and complete a CBS application. During the emergency proclamation, the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) completed applications for thousands of eligible students without signatures. In January 2021, when it ended, school buildings were still closed, once again rendering the signature requirement a barrier to access.

Making Auto-Enrollment Permanent with SB 5321

During the 2021 Legislative session, Senator T'wina Nobles sponsored Senate Bill 5321, which proposed making permanent the automatic enrollment of eligible students.⁵ This bill eliminated the need for students and parents/guardians to sign application forms to enroll in the College

⁴ Source: WSAC administrative data of CBS applications, pulled August 2020.

⁵ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billssummary?BillNumber=5321&Year=2021&Initiative=false>

Bound Scholarship program. SB 5321 became state law in June 2021, and in fall 2021 WSAC held the first of two webinars that introduced the change to college access professionals and middle and high school counselors.

Now, WSAC executes the enrollment process, so schools no longer need to focus their energy on seeking signed application forms. School staff are still responsible for regularly updating students' mailing addresses and contact information in WSAC's secure data portal (the "Toolbox"), but most of their face-to-face time with students is no longer consumed by administrative hurdles related to the application. School staff interested in conducting local outreach can also use the Toolbox in the WSAC portal to monitor which students WSAC identified as CBS eligible using data from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). With this information, they can inform their CBS students and families about the scholarship opportunity. The Toolbox currently has more than 1,800 users.

The Mechanics of CBS Auto Enrollment

WSAC and OSPI partner together to identify students eligible for auto-enrollment. Districts report to OSPI on FRPL eligibility, which is determined by a variety of methods, including but not limited to FRPL applications, family income surveys and direct certification of students receiving public assistance benefits.

Foster youth are automatically enrolled from 7th grade until high school graduation through a partnership between WSAC and the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF).

Using the contact information provided by the schools, WSAC staff can communicate with students and families directly about their eligibility for CBS. Students are mailed CBS certificates of enrollment along with information about the pledge requirements. To support multilingual families, WSAC sends certificates in English and Spanish depending on a student's home language, with plans to expand to additional languages in the future.

Table 2 shows the number of College Bound applications has increased by nearly 20,000 (66%) since the shift to auto-enrollment.

Table 2. CBS Applications Before and After Auto-Enrollment (SB 5321)

	Before SB 5321 (AY 2018-2019)	After SB 5321 (AY 2021-2022)	Difference
Applicants by the end of 8th grade ⁶	30,008	49,912	19,904

An increasing number of schools and districts have implemented universal free meals, and OSPI submitted a proposal for statewide universal free meals for consideration in the 2023 legislative session. Regardless of a district's meal process, they are encouraged by OSPI to submit income/FRPL eligibility information for all students. Given that initial CBS eligibility for auto-enrollment is based upon FRPL eligibility status at public schools, expansions of universal free

⁶ Includes all students from public schools who completed a CBS application (AY 2018-2019) or were completed due to auto-enrollment and the Governor's Proclamation (AY 2021-22). Data pulled as of August 2022.

meal programs may require adaptations in CBS's operations to ensure eligible students are not inadvertently excluded.

Not Just Auto-Enrollment: WSAC CBS Support for Students, Families, and College Access Professionals

Engaging with students who are eligible for the College Bound Scholarship requires more than automatic enrollment. With the goal of helping low-income students identify and access aid for college, WSAC provides additional supports and resources related to CBS.



Launched in the fall of 2019, OtterBot is WSAC's artificial intelligence (AI)-informed chatbot texting tool that is designed to help Washington high school students navigate the financial aid and postsecondary education application processes. High school juniors and seniors in Washington's CBS program receive periodic text messages from OtterBot about financial aid information, resources, and deadlines.

High school juniors and seniors who are enrolled in CBS and have a cell phone number on file are automatically enrolled in OtterBot.



CBS staff work collaboratively with the K-12 system, state agencies, non-profit organizations, and regional college access groups to assist students and families in understanding CBS information and eligibility requirements, and in filing the FAFSA or WASFA.

The Washington College Access Network, under the College Success Foundation's umbrella, supports College Bound Regional Officers who work with districts and schools on designing and implementing College Bound outreach and support strategies.

WSAC also works with many regional networks and other Community-Based Organizations.



WSAC's website includes:

- Resources on how to maintain eligibility, meet program requirements, and access the scholarship.
- Information for school and non-profit organization staff on how to request free promotional materials.

WSAC also communicates regularly through email:

- Over 4,000 college access professionals and school counselors in Washington State receive messages with resources for and guidance on supporting CBS students.
- College Bound students and families receive monthly emails with tips on preparing for college and reminders about how to access the scholarship.