



Agency Recommendation Summary

The Washington Award for Vocational Excellence (WAVE) is a merit scholarship awarded to CTE students. WAVE was suspended for 12 years during the Great Recession. The Board received funds to support the relaunch, but building back to pre-recession programming has been staff intensive, causing staff expenses beyond the funds provided. To meet reasonable administrative standards for the program such as: outreach, applicant support, recruiting and training approximately 100 volunteer reviewers, and processing an increasing number of WAVE applications, the Workforce Board requests funding for full-time staffing and software licensing costs to sustain appropriate access and timely award decisions for applicants.

Fiscal Summary

Fiscal Summary <i>Dollars in Thousands</i>	Fiscal Years		Biennial	Fiscal Years		Biennial
	2026	2027	2025-27	2028	2029	2027-29
Staffing						
FTEs	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8
Operating Expenditures						
Fund 001 - 1	\$165	\$165	\$330	\$165	\$165	\$330
Total Expenditures	\$165	\$165	\$330	\$165	\$165	\$330

Decision Package Description

Overview

This request is made by the Workforce Board in recognition of the growing outreach and administration needs for the recently relaunched Washington Award for Vocational Excellence (WAVE), a merit-based scholarship for secondary and postsecondary students in Career and Technical Education (CTE). The request raises a part-time FTE for staff administration to a full-time position and includes a minimal staffing allotment for both administrative assistance and communications and outreach efforts to reach all 49 Legislative Districts and communities across the state for potential applicants. The request also would fund the ongoing licensing fees for a soon-to-launch scholarship portal for WAVE applicants and education and industry (business and labor) reviewers.

Background

The Washington Award for Vocational Excellence (WAVE) was authorized by the Legislature in 1984. As stated in statute (RCW 28C.04.530), scholarships are awarded to applicants based on “proficiency in their chosen fields, attendance, attitude, character, leadership, and civic contributions.” The scholarships are distributed across the state, with up to three awards in each of the state’s 49 Legislative Districts, including a minimum of two awards for graduating high school seniors and up to one award for community and technical college students per Legislative District per year. Scholarships are not to exceed the level of annual tuition and fees at state research universities with award amounts currently subject to levels of legislative appropriations.

The Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) is the fiscal agent for WAVE awards and manages scholarship funds and their distribution to the attending institutions, as well as coordination with other state financial aid.

The Workforce Board is the program administrator for the WAVE program. This work includes:

- Outreach to potential applicants from all communities across the state – students and families along with CTE programs and instructors at high schools and community and technical colleges.
 - This list also includes coordination with strategic partners, including, but not limited to: OSPI, SBCTC (including their Workforce Education Council), Washington Association of Career and Technical Education, CTE student leadership organizations, such as SkillsUSA, Future Farmers of America (FFA), and Health Occupations Students of America (HOSA), community-based organizations that target educational attainment and support for marginalized and disadvantaged populations, public libraries, Workforce Development Councils, and many more.
 - Outreach includes a range of communication methods, including social media, direct emails to educators and counselors, posters and flyers, presentations and booths at relevant conferences, and engagement with our network of CTE supporters and partners.
- The WAVE application process – which includes technical support for applications and assuring completeness, including any follow-up necessary with students and CTE instructors.
 - Regular, quick cadence communications with partners at WSAC, including coordinating outreach to students and families via email blasts, aligning updates to WAVE landing pages to provide consistent messaging, and troubleshooting technical application issues as

they arise.

- Monitoring of communications through a dedicated email channel that enables students to ask questions and receive timely answers, including during the deadline crunch period when applications are coming due. Questions have included specific inquiries about the application process, but also have required more detailed responses to address applicant eligibility and use of awards.
- Direct communications with school districts and community and technical colleges across Washington to ensure scholarship information is widely distributed and questions are answered.
- Application review – Ensuring application completeness. Redacting personal information that might unduly bias a reviewer. Preparing scoring rubrics and input methods.
- Recruiting, training, and supporting a diverse group of industry and education reviewers. Approximately 100 volunteer reviewers provided their time to review and score WAVE applications during the 2024 application cycle. The Workforce Board maintains a standard of at least three reviewers for each application. The number of volunteer reviewers will grow as WAVE becomes more widely known and applications to the program increase. (Each year since re-launch, WAVE has attracted a growing number of applicants.)
- Managing the award selection process and outreach – ensuring application scores are accurately tallied, notifying applicants—both recipients and non-recipients, communicating with their home institutions, and overall media communications and support.

Recent History

Funding was paused for new awards during the Great Recession. The scholarship program was formally restored in 2022, and the Workforce Board was directed to begin administering the program after a 10+ year hiatus. The relaunched WAVE program application was temporarily hosted on an existing scholarship application portal, but this was only meant to be a short-term solution, as this software was outdated and did not support the full business needs for WAVE scholarship administration. In the 2024 Legislative Session, funding was provided for one-time costs for the development of a new scholarship application portal for WAVE. However, this appropriation did not include the ongoing licensing costs for the new application portal, which is part of this request. The Workforce Board is currently in development of this new portal and is expected to launch it for the 2025 scholarship application cycle.

The scholarship application portal was a critical investment. Workforce Board and WSAC staff have spent considerable time dealing with application problems and troubleshooting a wide range of issues in the application process. Despite these efforts, an unacceptably large proportion (over 50%) of applications that were started by students in the latest application cycle were never completed. Worse yet, some of these incomplete applications may represent multiple attempts to apply by the same applicants. We are optimistic that the new comprehensive scholarship application portal will dramatically improve this completion number by streamlining the application and review process, and better handling various aspects of scholarship administration, including application submission, review, and selection.

Even with the technology issues, three years after WAVE funding was restored, applications continue to increase, as do the number of WAVE award recipients. The Workforce Board, in partnership with WSAC and CTE community partners, are making significant outreach efforts to grow the candidate pool and award the maximum number of scholarships (147) in the 2025 application cycle.

WAVE Application and Award Statistics Since 2022 Relaunch						
	2022		2023		2024	
	Applications	2022 Awards	Applications	2023 Awards	Applications	2024 Awards
High School Student	86	60	187	78	232	86
Community/Technical College Student	28	18	63	30	102	35
Total	114	78	250	108	334	121

As the number of applications has increased and the processing of applications has become more complex, it has become apparent that, despite recruiting volunteer application evaluators from education, labor, and business stakeholders, the current annual funding of \$109,000 has not been adequate to fully support the recruitment, intake, and evaluation of WAVE applications. This is staff-intensive work, with significant bursts of work that occurs over short timeframes. Because of the importance and urgency of the situation, the Workforce Board moved approximately \$45,000 from other priority areas in the latest application cycle to support multiple internal staff, and even hired temporary help in 2023 to ensure each application was complete and to redact personal identifying information before sending out to reviewers. This investment in redirected staff resources from the agency in the last two cycles still fell short of the necessary outreach work to ensure broad representation from communities across the state.

The Workforce Board is also requesting legislation that would add registered apprenticeship as an eligible program for the WAVE award. This will expand the available pool of applicants and increase the need for outreach to programs and potential awardees who have not engaged with

the WAVE program in the past.

Current Year Progress on Applicant Portal

For the implementation of the new scholarship application portal, the agency has procured a software as a service solution that was identified last year through assessments and market survey work as an efficient path to managing the workload of preparing and evaluating applications and awarding WAVE scholarships. The agency is using a contracted IT project manager to oversee the customization of the new software. This initial investment will have three significant benefits:

- A new application portal customized for WAVE's requirements, including review procedures, which will be implemented in time to be used in the upcoming 2025 application cycle.
- A public information campaign advertising the rollout of the new more user-friendly portal and expanded outreach to potential applicants.
- Procurement of text redaction software to partly replace the manual redaction process required for three or more documents per application. Application redaction forestalls issues of reviewer biases based on applicant identity, region, or institution information which cannot be removed by the portal system. This software will be developed late in this fiscal year and will be implemented in FY26.

The portal will increase the percentage of completed applications, allow the agency to more efficiently monitor and analyze application flow, and collect applicants' (voluntarily provided) demographic information. More granular and reliable data will allow us to target outreach efforts to those schools and colleges that have not produced WAVE applicants. We will also have a better idea over time of how WAVE impacts college-going and employment outcomes for CTE students.

Replacing manual processes with a customized, cloud-based, scholarship management portal will enable us to provide better access, and more successful application completions, for individuals applying for the WAVE scholarship. Funding that supports maintaining this technology will enable us to meet the challenge of increasing applications through a combination of a small increase in staff and a shift from manual to more automated and timely processing of applications. It will also enable staff to more spend more time on improving outreach to students at non-participating high schools and colleges.

The Workforce Board's current procurement of a customizable software as a service program with a range of functions closely matching those needed for WAVE applications was identified as the best approach to mitigate challenges in evaluating and awarding WAVE scholarships. The Workforce Board leveraged a one-time appropriation provided by the Legislature in 2024 to pay for the portal. However, this approach comes with ongoing costs in the form of annual subscription costs for the portal system and the redaction software.

Bottom Line

Looking at the coming biennium, to fully cover the administrative and operating costs of the WAVE scholarship program requires:

- Technology: Annual licensing costs for two technology components for the operation of the WAVE scholarship application portal at \$43,000, plus contingency funds to cover potential needs for additional technical assistance of \$10,000.
- Staff support: 0.5 FTE to bring the WAVE program staffing to a full-time position, 0.15 FTE for communications and outreach engagement, and 0.1 FTE in administrative support. This would raise the total program staff to 1.25 FTE, when combined with the current ongoing appropriation of \$109,000/year for WAVE administration.

Assumptions and Calculations

Expansion, Reduction, Elimination or Alteration of a current program or service:

This proposal is an expansion of the WAVE award program administration funds to reflect the actual costs. This program has been funded at the following levels since the restart of the program in 2022.

FY22- \$0

FY23 - \$209,000

FY24 - \$109,000

FY25 - \$109,000 for staffing and \$300,000 in one-time funding for the WAVE scholarship application portal.

Detailed Assumptions and Calculations:

This request adds to the existing \$109,000 annual appropriation and would fund sufficient staffing for the true costs of administering the WAVE program.

Workforce Board staff FTE needs are in Workforce Assumptions, below. All funds requested are ongoing.

WAVE Portal licensing and related fees – ongoing annual request for the following:

- WAVE Scholarship Application Portal software as service licensing fees of \$35,000 per year, based on the posted rates of the selected provider.
- Redaction software licensing, estimated at \$8,000 per year, based on a review of market options available.
- Contingency funding of \$10,000 to provide additional technical assistance for issues beyond the scope of selected software vendors.

Workforce Assumptions:

Management Analyst 4: The Workforce Board currently is using nearly a full Management Analyst (MA4) FTE for the administration of WAVE despite having funding for approximately half of that FTE. Interest in the program continues to grow as students and educators learn about WAVE since the 2022 restart. This request would expand the current funded FTE by approximately 0.5 of that position to a full-time 1.0 FTE.

Communications Specialist 5: The agency engages in a significant outreach effort to generate interest from both students and CTE instructors, who play a critical role in the application process. The potential addition of registered apprentices to the candidate pool will further increase the need for that outreach effort to individuals and programs who were not previously engaged with WAVE. This proposal includes funding of .15 FTE of a Communications Consultant 5 to support the expanded outreach and communications work necessary to generate applicants from across the state, in every Legislative District, and from both high school and community and technical college programs.-

Administrative Assistant 4: The WAVE program generates a significant volume of external communications with students and school, and an increasing number of documents that need to be redacted to help remove reviewer bias. This redaction process is being made more efficient, but still involves significant staff oversight. An additional 0.1 FTE of an Administrative Assistant 4 is needed to keep this workload from impinging significantly on the other administrative staff of the agency.

Historical Funding:

The Workforce Board receives ongoing funding of \$109,000 for the administration of the WAVE program.

Strategic and Performance Outcomes

Strategic Framework:

Results Washington

The Workforce Board's proposal for funding for WAVE scholarship award process supports the Governor's Results Washington Goal 1: World Class Education, Goal 2: Prosperous Economy, and Goal 5: Efficient, Effective, & Accountable Government.

The WAVE program is a scholarship specifically for Washington's top CTE students, providing education supports to pursue in-demand occupations through additional postsecondary education and training. The intent of the WAVE program is to show CTE as a viable pathway to high-demand and living wage careers. CTE is curriculum that is directly informed by employer advisors, and students using their WAVE scholarship to pursue future education opportunities have an advantage over their peers because of their excellence in work-integrated programs. WAVE puts higher education into the hands of up to 147 students a year but can motivate thousands more through awareness and connections to other sources of financial aid, such as the Washington College Grant.

Funding the actual cost of staffing for WAVE program administration means better engagement and outreach to prospective applicants and their educators, and more effective and responsive support to students and reviewers facing technical issues or needing support.

Maintaining a modernized application system will make the WAVE application process easier and increase the speed of award announcements. CTE students will face fewer barriers in completing their applications and staff will be able to more efficiently process reviews and notify winners.

Talent and Prosperity for All (TAP) Plan Connections

The WAVE scholarship program is directly linked to the Workforce Board's four-year statewide strategic plan, "Talent and Prosperity for All" (TAP). TAP's guiding principles include closing economic disparities for marginalized communities and providing comprehensive support for individuals with barriers to employment. Increased outreach support means that staff can be more effective in seeking out communities or programs that are underrepresented in the applicant pool.

TAP seeks to provide a roadmap to better economic outcomes for jobseekers, workers, employers, and communities. The WAVE scholarship exemplifies this roadmap – providing students seeking to use their CTE skills and education for the postsecondary education program of their choice and ultimately, stable, family-sustaining careers.

Additionally, this proposal aligns with the agency's vision that every Washington community is thriving, inclusive, and economically resilient. Improving the usability and access to the WAVE gets us closer to this goal, as continuing postsecondary CTE education will be more affordable and accessible to students who are awarded WAVE scholarships, and seeing the success of their peers inspires future applicants. Washington needs these CTE students to fill high-wage, in-demand jobs that contribute to thriving, inclusive and economically resilient communities.

Performance Outcomes:

The Workforce Board has set the following goals for this proposal:

- 50% reduction in percentage of incomplete applications by FY26, supported by staff outreach and technical support to participants.
- 50% reduction in average time it takes for staff to complete required redactions for an application by the 2026 award cycle.
- Staff outreach to support expansion of CTC participation to over 75% of CTCs by FY26; currently at 59%.
- Increase in the number of participating school districts by 50% by FY26 through targeted outreach to communities without applications.
- Awards made one month earlier than in FY24 by FY26 to provide increased time for students to consider the range of education options available as an award winner.

A major objective is reducing the disruption of agency operations caused by concentration of much of the work into a short period of time because of the limited staffing available. More rapid completion and redaction of applications will allow other WAVE processing activities to be spread out over more time.

Equity Impacts

Community Outreach and Engagement:

While customer feedback was gathered during the development of last year's proposal for funds to support the purchase of SaaS software for the WAVE applicant portal and additional staffing, this year's proposal is specifically for the gaps in funding as described in this request. No additional input or feedback was solicited for this proposal.

Disproportional Impact Considerations:

The Workforce Board does not expect any negative disproportional impacts from funding this proposal. This proposal will support full staffing for WAVE administration and amplifies our ability to reach communities who have had limited or no engagement with the relaunched WAVE program.

Target Communities and Populations:

Based on the improvements to the WAVE application portal and a quickly increasing interest in the WAVE program, we expect applications in the 2025 cycle and beyond to continue to exceed prior years, as well as dramatically improved application completion rates. This is the best possible scenario, but to fully support our program as the WAVE program administrators, an increase in staff administration from the current part-time FTE is needed.

While addressing application completion rates and increased outreach will benefit all students applying for this program, we expect to see increased usage by populations and geographic areas that have had limited engagement with this program due to this investment. We still have schools and community and technical colleges that have not had applicants or WAVE winners since the relaunch in 2022. Targeted outreach to these communities, as well as broad outreach across the state, will be a key component of this increased staffing request.

Demographic data on the demographics of the participants was not collected through the old applicant portal. A new application portal will allow the Workforce Board to collect demographic data that will be voluntarily provided by applicants. This demographic data will allow the agency to identify populations that should be targeted in future outreach efforts to improve WAVE application numbers. Outreach to groups that disproportionately do not apply for WAVE will increase awareness of the program, and improvements to the application process via a customized portal will increase the number of scholarship applicants from groups that have been historically excluded from higher education. In turn, this increases equitable access to CTE education in Washington.

Community Inputs and Incorporation:

Agency staff received real-time feedback on WAVE portal processes from students and career and technical educators from around the state. The 2024 budget funded a new, user-friendly applicant portal, which will be a critical support to improving the application process, particularly in addressing technological barriers and other glitches causing students to abandon their application effort. This request would fund the ongoing licensing fees from that investment.

Outreach and awareness resulted in a diverse cohort of scholarship winners in the 2024 award cycle. Students shared their stories of personal challenges and overcoming obstacles with the Washington media. This year's outreach resulted in 10 newspaper and television news stories. View the 2024 coverage and these inspirational stories at <https://www.wtb.wa.gov/wave>. This work can be amplified further with full staffing as outlined in this request.

Other Collateral Connections

HEAL Act Agencies Supplemental Questions

Not applicable.

Puget Sound Recovery:

Not applicable.

State Workforce Impacts:

Not applicable.

Intergovernmental:

Not applicable.

Stakeholder Impacts:

Students in both high school and in community and technical colleges are the main beneficiaries of this funding request through more effective outreach, support for technical issues in the application or award process, and ensuring that the new application portal remains up-to-date and under license.

State Facilities Impacts:

Not applicable.

Changes from Current Law:

Not applicable.

Legal or Administrative Mandates:

Not applicable.

Governor's Salmon Strategy:

Not applicable.

IT Addendum

Does this Decision Package include funding for any IT-related costs, including hardware, software, (including cloud-based services), contracts or IT staff?

No

Objects of Expenditure

Objects of Expenditure <i>Dollars in Thousands</i>	Fiscal Years		Biennial	Fiscal Years		Biennial
	2026	2027	2025-27	2028	2029	2027-29
Obj. A	\$65	\$65	\$130	\$65	\$65	\$130
Obj. B	\$24	\$24	\$48	\$24	\$24	\$48
Obj. E	\$66	\$66	\$132	\$66	\$66	\$132
Obj. G	\$3	\$3	\$6	\$3	\$3	\$6
Obj. T	\$7	\$7	\$14	\$7	\$7	\$14

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