

Understanding College & Career Readiness Pathways – START HERE: A Guide for Tacoma Families

Welcome! This guide helps you explore pathway options for your student. Answer a few questions below to identify which pages might be most helpful—but feel free to explore all options!

Question 1: Does your student work independently, ask questions when they need help, and are willing to learn outside of class time?



Yes → Explore Page 2:
Running Start, CIHS, AP



Not yet → Explore Page 3:
General HS, Tacoma Online,
Maritime, CTE options

Question 2: Does your student have a clear career or technical interest?



Yes → Explore Page 3:
Technical College, CTE Dual
Credit, Maritime



**Still exploring → Explore
Page 2:** AP, CIHS, Running
Start

Question 3: Will your family need federal financial aid for all 4 years of college?



Yes → Important: Review
financial aid impacts on
Page 2



Not sure → Read about
financial aid considerations
on **Pages 2-3**

Question 4: Does your student have an IEP, 504, or need ongoing support from familiar staff?



Yes → Focus on pathways
with full high school support
(noted on each page)



No → All pathways available

Remember: These suggestions are starting points. Every pathway is valuable. Read about any option that interests your family. Talk with your school counselor about what's right for YOUR student.

Turn to Pages 2-3 for detailed pathway information →



Understanding College-Readiness Pathways - A Guide for Tacoma Families

	AP (Advanced Placement)	CIHS (College in the High School)	Running Start
Creates permanent college transcript?	No	Yes	Yes
Creates permanent college GPA?	No	Yes	Yes
Affects financial aid limits?	No	Yes	Yes
Credit guaranteed?	No, Depends on exam	Yes, if passed	Yes, if passed
Most flexible option?	Yes, most flexible	Less flexible	Least flexible
IEP and ML support?	Fully supported	Fully supported	Student must self-advocate

Advanced Placement (AP)

What it is: College-level class taught in your high school. Students may earn credit by passing the AP exam in May.

Benefits

- ✔ Grade stays only on high school transcript
- ✔ College credit based on exam score (not course grade)
- ✔ Does NOT start a college GPA
- ✔ Does NOT affect federal financial aid credit limits
- ✔ Widely recognized nationwide
- ✔ Exam fee reductions available for low-income families
- ✔ IEP and ML needs fully supported by high school staff
- ✔ 85% of selective colleges view AP favorably in admissions
- ✔ Students scoring 3+ show higher college graduation rates
- ✔ 3 out of 4 AP students start college with credit
- ✔ Helps students graduate college on time

Consider: Credit is not guaranteed (depends on exam score). Some private colleges limit AP credit.

Best for families wanting proven college preparation, lower financial risk and flexibility.

College in the High School (CIHS)

What it is: Students take a real college course at their high school and earn actual college credit (example: Central Washington University partnership).

Benefits

- ✔ Guaranteed college credit if student passes
- ✔ Starts official college transcript
- ✔ Credits usually transfer well to WA public colleges
- ✔ Can save tuition later
- ✔ IEP and ML needs fully supported by high school staff
- ✔ Earn HS credit faster: 5 college credits = 1.0 HS credit vs typical 0.5 HS credit
- ✔ More time to retake courses if needed or explore electives

Important to Understand

- ⚠ Grades (including F or withdrawals) are permanent on college transcript
- ⚠ Coursework counts toward federal financial aid "maximum timeframe"
- ⚠ Most financial aid requires students to complete 125-150% of their degree credits.

Best for students ready for college-level responsibility and planning an efficient path to a degree with built-in flexibility.

Running Start

What it is: Students take classes at Tacoma Community College while still in high school. Many graduate with an Associate's degree.

Benefits

- ✔ Tuition covered (fees may apply)
- ✔ Earn large number of college credits
- ✔ Can save thousands in tuition.

Important to Understand

- ⚠ Every grade becomes part of permanent college transcript
- ⚠ All credits count toward federal financial aid maximum limits
- ⚠ Academic performance affects future scholarships and aid eligibility
- ⚠ Students must self-advocate for support and attend professor office hours if falling behind
- ⚠ IEP and ML accommodations require student to request and coordinate.

Best for highly motivated, independent students with clear academic goals who are ready to advocate for themselves.

IMPORTANT FOR FAMILIES: Only AP keeps all options open. CIHS and Running Start create permanent college records that follow your student forever and use federal financial aid credits.

Understanding Career-Readiness & Alternative Pathways - A Guide for Tacoma Families

High school is where students learn key formative skills in communication, social life, and opportunities to explore BEFORE going to college or career. These pathways are helpful options but should NOT feel like a career choice you're making in 9th grade. Taking time to grow is smart, not falling behind.

	General HS	Tacoma Online	Technical College	CTE Dual Credit	Maritime 253
Creates permanent college transcript?	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Creates permanent college GPA?	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Affects financial aid limits?	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Stays at home high school?	Yes	Yes (online)	No	Yes	Partial (half-day)
IEP and ML support?	Yes (full support)	Yes (full support)	No (self-advocate)	Yes (full support)	Yes (full support)
Career exploration focus?	Flexible	Flexible	Yes	Yes	Yes

General High School Courses	Tacoma Online	Technical College Dual Credit	CTE Dual Credit	Maritime 253 Skills Center
<p>What it is: Traditional high school pathway where students take standard courses, earn their diploma, and graduate without any college transcript.</p> <p>✓ Benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No permanent college record or GPA - Preserves ALL financial aid eligibility - Full IEP and ML support from familiar staff - Time to explore interests and mature academically - Can start college with a clean slate when ready - Participate fully in high school social and extracurricular life <p>👉 Best for students who want to explore, grow, and keep all future doors open.</p>	<p>What it is: Tacoma Public Schools' K-12 online program serving students across Washington. Accredited, free online school using TPS curriculum.</p> <p>✓ Benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Flexible scheduling for students who need it - Work at your own pace - Supports students with IEPs - Earn a TPS diploma - No college transcript or financial aid impact <p>⚠ Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Requires self-motivation and time management - Less social interaction than traditional school <p>👉 Best for students who thrive with independent learning and need flexible scheduling.</p>	<p>What it is: Earn both high school and college credits through Bates Technical College or Clover Park Technical College while staying attached to your home high school.</p> <p>✓ Benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learn career-technical skills - Earn college credits in technical programs - Remain connected to home high school <p>⚠ Important to Understand:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creates permanent college transcript - Counts toward financial aid limits - Students must self-advocate for support <p>👉 Best for students with clear technical career interests who are ready for college-level responsibility.</p>	<p>What it is: Earn college credit for completing Career and Technical Education courses right at your home high school.</p> <p>✓ Benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stay at your home high school with peers - Full IEP and ML support from school staff - Learn career skills while earning college credit - Transition into professional-technical careers <p>⚠ Important to Understand:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creates permanent college transcript - Counts toward financial aid limits <p>👉 Best for students interested in career-technical pathways who want to stay in their familiar school environment.</p>	<p>What it is: NEW for 2026-27! Regional CTE center (partnership between Port of Tacoma and TPS) where students attend for half the day while remaining enrolled at their home high school.</p> <p>✓ Benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advanced, industry-focused maritime courses - Does NOT create college transcript - Does NOT affect financial aid - Full support services available - Explore maritime careers without risk - Remain connected to home high school <p>👉 Best for students interested in maritime and related industries who want career exploration without college transcript risk.</p>

Making Your Decision:

- ✓ Talk with your school counselor about what's right for YOUR student
- ✓ Visit programs to see what feels right for your family
- ✓ Trust your student's readiness level—there's no rush
- ✓ Remember: choosing high school or career pathways is just as valuable as choosing college pathways

Notes for Our Family - Pathway Planning Workspace

9th Grade - Explore & Build Foundation ▼

Pathways we're interested in: _____

Questions for our counselor: _____

Courses to take this year: _____

Important dates/deadlines: _____

Notes: _____

10th Grade - Narrow Interests & Try Options ▼

Pathways we're seriously considering: _____

Introductory courses or programs to try: _____

Questions we still have: _____

Important dates/deadlines: _____

Notes: _____

11th Grade - Commit to Pathway ▼

Pathway(s) we've chosen: _____

Application deadlines and requirements: _____

Support or accommodations needed: _____

Important dates/deadlines: _____

Notes: _____

12th Grade - Maximize Your Pathway ▼

Courses/credits we're completing: _____

College applications or next steps: _____

Final questions or concerns: _____

Important dates/deadlines: _____

Notes: _____

Key Contacts for Our Family

School Counselor: _____ Email: _____

Program Coordinator: _____ Email: _____

Other (specify): _____ Email: _____

Remember: Pathways can be combined or adjusted. This is YOUR family's journey—there's no single 'right' answer.