

AT A GLANCE

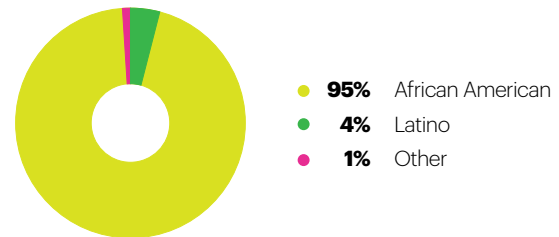
Washington Leadership Academy launched in fall 2016 with an initial class of 110 ninth graders. In 2017, it will add a new class and continue to grow by one grade per year until it reaches full capacity. Sometimes referred to as the “High-Tech Hogwarts,” WLA is located in a former seminary college with stained glass windows and vaulted ceilings.

Executive Director: Stacy Kane

Founding Principal: Joseph Webb

Projected Student Demographics (at Full Enrollment)

Student Enrollment: 400 Students (Grades 9-12)



85%

QUALIFY FOR FREE OR REDUCED PRICE LUNCH

20%

QUALIFY FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

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In 2015–16, there were just 30 black students taking AP Computer Science in all of Washington, DC. In 2017–18, just one school—the Washington Leadership Academy—will teach AP Computer Science to more than triple that number—104 in all, including 55 girls—in a course offered to its entire 10th grade class. Those same students will go on to take a course in Computer Science during each of their remaining high school years, as part of WLA’s commitment to four years of Computer Science for every student. The school is also one of just a handful of schools across the country to make virtual reality a pillar of its curriculum.

In what the school’s founders believe is one of the best ways to transform the outmoded, authority-driven practices that prevail in American high schools, WLA is putting cutting-edge technology at the center of teaching and learning. “We’re going to have [students] tapped into the technologies as they are coming out in real time rather than having them be twenty years behind,” said Co-founder and Executive Director Stacy Kane.

WLA’s curriculum and teaching methods are built around the use of technology and real-time student data to personalize instruction. School staff closely monitor student achievement and growth throughout the year, using various assessment systems, including interim assessments that students take four times a year. Teachers leverage digital tools and resources to power and track student learning, tailoring instruction to meet students’ specific needs. Students also have access to their own achievement data, and work closely with advisors to set goals and understand their progress toward mastering the skills and knowledge necessary for true college and career readiness. Students can progress through content at the pace they need in order to build mastery.

The school’s vision isn’t just about enabling students to be proficient users of technology, but about developing their abilities to create new ones. “If we give students the exposure and opportunities to find their passions and practice their skills, our scholars will become public leaders across different fields, leveraging what they have learned to change the world,” said Co-founder Seth Andrew.

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The school is devoted to making sure all students are well prepared for college, including beginning to do college-level work by the 11th and 12th grades. The WLA team has adopted rigorous standards for math and English-language arts; and has outlined sequences of courses in those areas, as well as in science and social studies, that become progressively more demanding each year, and culminate in Advanced Placement courses. Students are also able to select from a range of electives every year, including Robotics, Mindfulness, Running, Advanced Coding, DJ Basics and Photography, among many others. Advisors work with students to tailor classes and projects to student interests. Principles of social justice and equity are integrated and woven throughout the curriculum and student experience. For example, students participate in intensive topic studies, such as the social injustice of the achievement gap, and ethics in conflict.

WLA's leaders seek out teachers who are adept at using technology. But because they want students to have access to expertise beyond their full-time staff, they're also experimenting with a new approach to staffing: tapping into the freelance "gig economy" to hire part-time teachers with specific, hard-to-find skills (such as Silicon Valley programmers who don't want to leave their jobs but could teach a class remotely during the school's extended day). Face-to-face freelancers teach many elective classes. WLA has also made external partners a central part of the work of the school. Current partners include Facebook, Microsoft, Vice Education, TimeLooper, DC Tutoring and Mentoring Initiative, Digital Pioneers Academy, Catholic University, Capital Partners for Education, George Washington University, Stemly,

and the CloseUp Foundation. Joint projects range from a virtual-reality field trip, to "hackathons", to hosting computer scientists regularly in WLA classrooms.

WLA educators are committed to serving students who have been failed or disenfranchised by the current system—students who need to overcome negative experiences in order to rebuild their trust in schools and their own self-confidence as learners. They want students to feel a sense of belonging and to feel that school is a home to them. That's why building strong relationships among staff, students, families and the community is central to their work. The school employs a full-time psychologist on staff who meets with students who have experienced trauma, along with their teachers. Classroom practices, and overall school culture norms, ensure a web of integrated and individualized support. Students participate in formal, advisory periods daily, where they meet with teachers and faculty who review strengths, growth areas and goals. No more than 10 students are assigned to any advisor.

So far, results from the school's approach look promising. According to the MAP assessment, ninth graders achieved an average of two grade levels of growth . . . all in their first three months of school. The school got more good news at the end of the year: Sixty-four percent of students were reading above the national average, compared with just 37 percent when they entered WLA the previous fall; in math, 50 percent exceeded the national norm, although only 28 percent had scored above the national average in the fall.