



How They Came to Be

Washington Leadership Academy's XQ Super School Journey

The idea for Washington Leadership Academy was born in 2013 with a clear vision: to build a school with technology at its core that prepares young people for lives of leadership and positive change. The model was inspired by the potential of new digital tools to help level the playing field for disenfranchised students. The WLA founding team of educators, parents, technologists, public servants, D.C. leaders, and young people developed a high school that motivates and prepares students to lead and change the world.

Washington Leadership Academy (WLA) prepares students to thrive in the world and change it for the better.



Discover Washington Leadership Academy

By building trusting relationships and giving students unprecedented opportunities to learn and lead, educators at WLA prepare students to lead in the future. Students at WLA take rigorous core classes, enriched by real-world experiences and access to experts, as well as student-selected projects and electives—all combined with the latest in technology and innovation. All WLA students take computer science and get hands-on experience with emerging technology, including virtual/augmented reality. WLA combines civic education, social justice education, and support for students as they explore who they are and where they want to go in life. Driven by an approach to teaching and learning that is both “high tech” and “high touch,” WLA is making a true difference for students in Washington, D.C. The results of these efforts speak for themselves—the school’s senior hallway is full of students’ acceptance letters to local and national colleges and scholarship award letters.

Washington Leadership Academy opened in 2016, is authorized by the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, and serves 400 students in grades 9-12.



Washington Leadership Academy Design Features

1. Creators, Not Just Consumers, of Technology

Computer science is required for all students all four years, and students have direct experience with emerging technologies, including web design, virtual reality, and a state-of-the-art MakerSpace. In the 2017–18 school year, its second year of operation and with its first group of eligible students, WLA more than tripled the number of Black girls taking the AP Computer Science Principles exam in all of Washington, D.C. This pattern still holds true today. In the 2018–19 school year, out of all D.C. students who passed the AP Computer Science Principles exam, 33% of girls and 91% of Black students came from WLA. Notably, the highest-performing Black student from all of Washington, D.C. was from WLA.

WLA also partners with organizations and experts to support tech creation and use. In the school's state-of-the-art makerspace, students learn development, graphic design, and hardware engineering with the support of both teachers and outside experts. Tech partners also help teachers build virtual reality into courses across the academic curriculum, tutor and support students, and provide engineers to assist students with computer science.



Monte Price

12th Grader

“Last year I did an internship with the makerspace. I think it’s a really great program for students because it’s structured but once we learn, we’re free to do whatever we want... Recently, we designed signage for the building, with an image of a famous person’s face and facts about them. I liked the fact that we had the chance to make something that would actually go up in the school.”



Stacy Kane

Co-Founder and Executive Director

“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.”

2. A school and an incubator in one

WLA prioritizes creating a safe, nurturing environment for its 95% Black and 75% free-and-reduced lunch student body. Social justice themes are infused throughout the curriculum, and the school’s leaders focus on recruiting adults of color to consciously and consistently serve as teachers, professional partners, and mentors, as this helps students of color see themselves and their own potential through the representation of the adults around them.

Regular routines at the school help build these strong connections. Every morning, teachers and leaders are strategically stationed throughout the building to personally greet students as they enter. Students participate in formal advisory periods, with one teacher per 10 students. During 1:1 meetings, advisory teachers work with students to review strengths, growth areas, and goals. A full-time psychologist on staff meets with students who have experienced trauma and provides support to their teachers. Rather than punitive responses, the school has developed an intervention system with restorative justice practices and therapeutic strategies integrated throughout school programming.

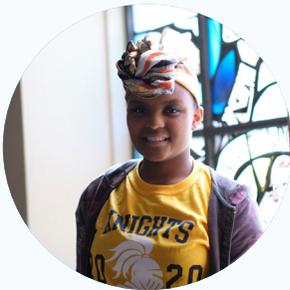
WLA partners with leading organizations to train and support teachers on social-emotional learning, restorative justice, trauma-informed care, and de-escalation strategies. These efforts are further supported by a teacher-to-teacher coaching system that accomplishes many goals simultaneously: helping teachers improve their practice, allowing school leaders to share responsibility with lead teachers, and building a pool of leaders inside the school.



De'Von Lewis

11th Grader

“If you ask for something at my school, if you think it’s worthwhile they’ll give you all the support you need. They’ll give you what you need to be successful. My teachers know that home life comes before school life and know that what happens at home comes first.”



Khalilah Sutton

Alumna

“Schools need to trust the students to get the work done. Trusting the student body is how to hold them accountable. At WLA, students are learning at their own pace.”

3. Powerful practices and impactful innovations

During the three years before opening WLA, the founding team visited more than 40 schools across the country to gather ideas and best practices. The result is a school that combines a student-centered culture, goals for every student to achieve, interdisciplinary project-based learning, and real-world experiences. During “project studio” time, students practice real-world skills and apply their learning in the community. All juniors at WLA are required to complete an internship with a community organization. To give students voice and choice, WLA provides daily electives that are often taught by community partners, giving students further real-world learning while expanding their social, professional, and cultural networks. Examples include robotics, mindfulness, running, advanced coding, DJ basics, and photography, among many others.

WLA made much of their planning and thinking available on their website in an effort to support the field, and are further invested in other partnerships with the same goal. For example, WLA is partnering with CommonLit, a curriculum nonprofit, to develop and pilot a nationwide competency-based literacy curriculum and associated assessments that are being used by 100 schools across the nation in the 2020–21 school year. The curriculum is the first free, common-core aligned, rigorous, and online English language arts curriculum, and in the 2019 school year all 9th and 10th graders at WLA (except for a subset of students who were below a 3rd grade level on diagnostic testing) took ELA courses using the CommonLit curriculum.



4. Civic engagement and social justice

WLA’s commitment to social justice extends beyond their commitment to their school culture and includes supporting students in becoming engaged citizens through interdisciplinary projects and direct action in their communities. In one project, students focused on the topic of “How do social justice movements work?” creating a guide for the next successful social justice movement.

In another project, WLA students invited their community to “WLActivism: Rock The Vote,” where students and staff led attendees in short segments about the right to vote, issues that are important to their communities, voter suppression, and how to register to vote. One student’s segment about voter suppression engaged the 100+ participants with a related video asking students to identify any personal ways that they felt voter suppression has impacted them or people they know.

“One of the key things that helps us make sure that we are continuing systems of equity is that we have incorporated our stakeholder’s voice, especially those that are marginalized. It’s important to empathize and to incorporate the feedback from families, students, and staff members — it helps when people feel they are part of the same team.”

— **Adriana Rigo**, 11th Grader

Theory Into Action

Student work: Civic engagement in action

WLA Alum Jerome Foster, as part of his high school journey, completed an internship with Congressman John Lewis, participated in protests with Jane Fonda, and testified at the United Nations with Greta Thunberg. He also joined in over 50 Climate Strikes in front of the White House. "I am advocating for the Climate Change Education Act to pass both the house and the senate," said Foster. He is the founder and executive director of [OneMillionOfUs](#), an initiative to turn out the youth vote in the 2020 election.

California State Standards Met

- ✓ Social Studies 11.12.1: Explain how the role of government in a market economy includes providing for national defense, addressing environmental concerns, defining and enforcing property rights, attempting to make markets more competitive, and protecting consumer rights.
- ✓ CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

Competencies Met:

- ✓ Civics
- ✓ Leadership
- ✓ Science



Molly Graham

Social Worker

"Something we're trying to do is just really have more wellness touchpoints with all students. So we started a social-emotional development at home email series, which has been fun. It includes these mini-lessons around how to combat anxiety, how to use behavioral activation to fight depression, how to practice mindfulness and gratitude, and finding space in your home to be able to do these things."

“I feel like even if you can’t find too many people that share the same background as you it’s a typical school sense where you can still find a group that fits you even if they might not look like you.”

— **Markeith Artis**, 12th Grader

Student data

Tiger Ventures serves 73 students in grades 8-12 this school year.

77%	White	100%	Free/Reduced price Lunch
11%	Black	13%	Special Education
6%	Latinx		
7%	Other		
0%	Asian		
0%	American Indian or Alaska Native		
0%	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander		



Eric Collazo

Principal

“One of the key things that helps us make sure that we are continuing systems of equity is that we have incorporated our stakeholder’s voice, especially those that are marginalized. It’s important to empathize and to incorporate the feedback from families, students, and staff members — it helps when people feel they are part of the same team.”

Blogs and Media

- [How to Find Internships in High School \(Advice From a College Intern\)](#)
- [How to Build Strong Relationships with Students Using Culturally Responsive Teaching](#)
- [How an “Our Kids, Our Goals” Approach Works to Support Students](#)
- [Expert Advice on Student Trauma To Help You Help Students](#)
- [Teaching for Remote Learning: Lessons We’ve Learned So Far](#)
- [Changing the World, One Computer at a Time](#)

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