

Washington state Supreme Court: Passing the bar no longer required to be a lawyer



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By Carleen Johnson / The Center Square

Passing the bar exam will no longer be a requirement for becoming a lawyer in Washington, the state Supreme Court ruled in a pair of [orders](#) Friday.

Washington becomes only the second state to officially approve alternatives to the bar, following its southern neighbor, Oregon, which is set to make the change in May.

The state Supreme Court appointed a [Bar Licensure Task Force](#) to study alternative ways to show competency in 2020, after COVID-19-related modifications resulting in many questioning the efficacy of the current exam.

During a September presentation before the Washington State Bar Association Board of Governors, Washington Supreme Court Justice Raquel Montoya-Lewis, one of the chairs of the Bar Licensure Task Force, said the movement comes in part “from law students who have raised issues about equity, not just in the history of the adoption of

the bar exam, but also over the course of many decades, when you look at the disproportionate impacts that the bar exam has on examinees of color.”

She went on to note, "They tend to fail the bar exam in disproportionate numbers."

The Bar Licensure Task Force found that the traditional exam "disproportionately and unnecessarily blocks marginalized groups from entering the practice of law" and is "at best minimally effective for ensuring competent lawyers."

As an alternative to the bar exam, law school graduates can earn the right to practice in a number of different ways, including completing a six-month apprenticeship while being supervised and guided by a qualified attorney and complete three state-approved courses, or finishing 12 qualifying skills credits and 500 hours of work as a legal intern, or completing completing standardized educational materials and tests under the guidance of a mentoring lawyer, in addition to 500 hours of work as a legal intern.

“With these alternative pathways, we recognize that there are multiple ways to ensure a competent, licensed body of new attorneys who are so desperately needed around the state," Montoya-Lewis said in a post-decision [news release](#) from Washington Courts.

These changes are in addition to Washington adopting the new National Conference of Bar Examiners' NextGen bar exam, which focuses more on practice and real-world skills. That exam will be implemented in summer 2026.

The court also lowered the bar exam minimum passing score from 270 to 266, a reduction previously made during the pandemic.