

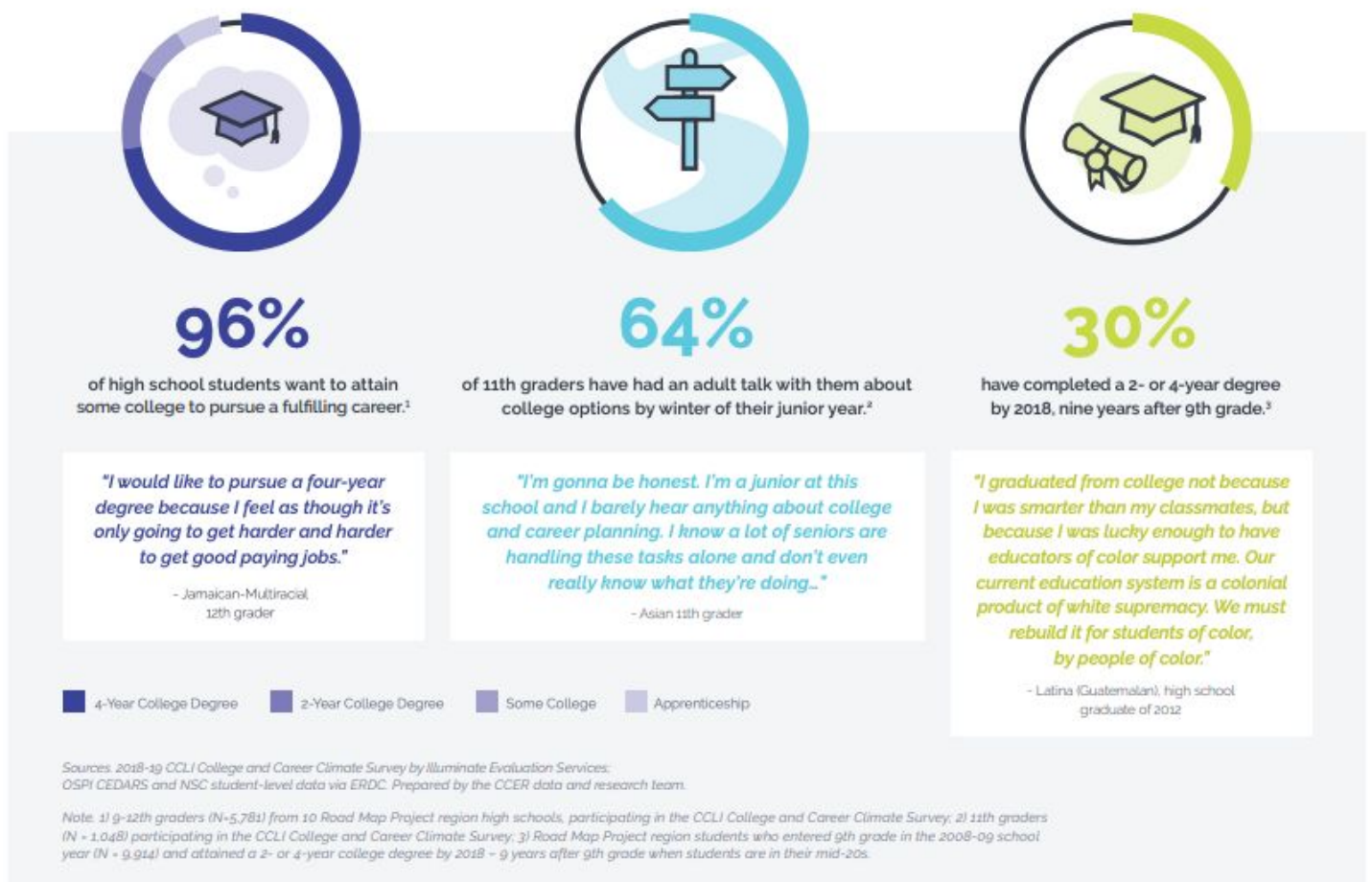
KING COUNTY PROMISE:

Improving College Access and Success for Historically Underserved Young People in King County

Postsecondary credentials can unlock the door to living wage jobs, but too few King County students complete. National research into the value of postsecondary credentials has consistently found positive financial returns on investment in postsecondary education. Postsecondary credentials — including short term technical certificates, Associate’s Degrees and Bachelor’s Degrees — increase economic mobility and act as a shield from unemployment during economic downturns.¹ A report from the Washington Roundtable projects that the state will have 740,000 job openings between 2016 and 2021 many of which will require postsecondary credentials.² More recent research by Washington STEM projects that, by 2024, almost 90% of living wage jobs in King County will require some kind of postsecondary education.³

Young people in King County understand the value of postsecondary education. A recent survey of over 7,000 high school students in the Road Map region (South Seattle and South King County) finds that 96% of students want to attain some college education after high school. Despite this fact, only 64% of 11th graders report that an adult had talked to them about their college options. As a result, only 30% of students complete any kind of postsecondary credential by their mid-20s. For students of color, the completion rates are even lower.⁴

Figure 1 - Postsecondary aspirations, support and postsecondary completion in the Road Map region



¹ Carnevale, Rose and Cheah (2011). *The College Payoff*. [\[LINK\]](#)

² Washington Roundtable (2015). *Pathways to Great Jobs in Washington State*. [\[LINK\]](#)

³ Washington STEM (2018). *STEM by the Numbers: King County*. [\[LINK\]](#)

⁴ Road Map Project (2019). *Results Report*. [\[LINK\]](#)

Students lack adequate support to navigate to and through college. If postsecondary credentials have value and young people want to pursue education after high school, why do so few complete? And why do historically underserved young people complete at lower rates than their White middle and upper income peers?⁵ These questions are the subject of intensive study locally and across the country. The drivers of low completion rates are complex, but the biggest gaps in Washington State and King County are: lack of adequate student supports to access college; and poor system alignment. **The King County Promise fills in the gaps by providing the critical supports that students tell us they need.**

Inadequate student supports. Paying for college is only one piece of a larger puzzle. A recent survey of over 7,000 students showed that in South King County, only 64% of 11th graders have had an adult talk with them about their college options. When it comes to increasing college enrollment and completion, student supports - including college and career exploration, help with completion college applications and financial aid forms, academic tutoring and social-emotional and mental health supports - are just as critical as financial supports. In fact, without adequate supports, students cannot access financial aid to begin with. Data show that students leave more than \$10 million in federal financial aid on the table every year in King County. The American School Counselor Association recommends that all K-12 schools maintain a student to counselor ratio of 250:1, but in Washington State the average ratio of students to counselors is 482:1.⁶ Levels of college navigation supports vary significantly across the state and county and too often students with the most need receive the least support. For example, Kent-Meridian High School — a large, comprehensive high school in the Kent School District that serves 1,284 low-income students — has the same number of college and career counselors as Bellevue High School, which serves only 157 low-income students.⁷ Lack of effective counselling and guidance in high school leaves students without the opportunity to explore college and career options, understand academic and other requirements needed to gain acceptance and navigate the labyrinth of college application and financial aid processes. Despite critical gaps in high school supports, some students are able to successfully navigate the transition from high school to college only to find that their college also lacks adequate support. While the ratio of students to support staff are not formally reported, colleges in King County report ratios in the range of 800-900:1. With such a diluted support structure, it is no wonder that almost half of Road Map high school graduates who enroll directly in college do not persist to a second year of college.⁸

Poor system alignment. Another major barrier to student success has to do with high school and college systems that are poorly coordinated in many areas including curriculum, student support and communication to students and families. Misalignment has many consequences for students including low rates of direct college enrollment and high rates of pre-college (or remedial) course taking. As illustrated in Figure 2 below, an average of 38% of King County high school graduates that enroll directly in a community or technical college take at least one pre-college course.⁹ These courses are costly for students and institutions and slow time to completion. Research has also demonstrated that students who take pre-college courses complete at significantly lower rates than students who avoid

⁵ We use “historically underserved young people” or “historically underserved students” to connote a wide range of student subgroups that do not historically enroll in and succeed in college at rates equivalent to White, non-Hispanic middle and upper income young people. This includes low-income young people, young people of color, English learners, homeless young people, current/former foster youth, young people involved in the juvenile justice system, LGBTQ youth and young people with special needs.

⁶ American School Counselor Association (2015). *State-by-State Student-to-Counselor Ratio Report*. [\[LINK\]](#)

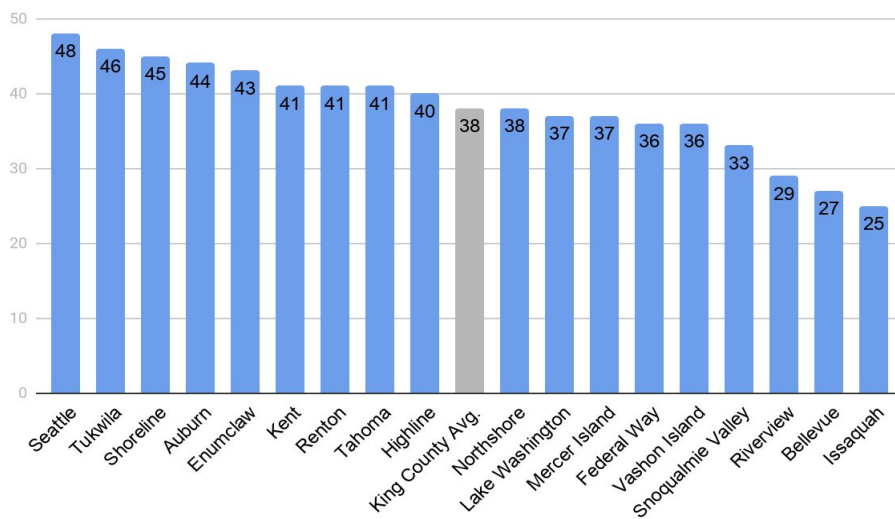
⁷ Internal research conducted in 2018 by the Community Center for Education Results College and Career team.

⁸ Road Map Project *Data Dashboard*. High School Graduates Direct College Persistence. Accessed on April 3, 2019. [\[LINK\]](#)

⁹ Education Research and Data Center (2019). High School Graduate Outcomes dashboard. Accessed on April 3, 2019. [\[LINK\]](#)

such courses.¹⁰ One might argue that these students are not academically prepared for college and the pre-college courses help them achieve college readiness. Evidence suggests that this is often not the case. National research has established that high school GPA is a strong predictor of a student’s ability to succeed in college.¹¹ Despite this fact, a full 30% of King County high school graduates with a GPA at or above 3.0 who enroll community or technical colleges take one or more pre-college course.¹² It is clear this is not solely an issue of academic readiness, but one that requires a system wide examination of how we assess a given students “readiness” for college.

Figure 2 - Pre-college course taking amongst 2016 high school graduates who enrolled directly in a community or technical college



If local leaders do not act, students who grow up in King County will miss out on opportunities in the bustling, local economy. As reported in the Seattle Times, Seattle is now the highest educated major city in the United States: 63% of Seattleites now have a Bachelor’s degree or higher, up from only 47% in 2000. The Times also notes that, “among those say they’ve moved to the city from another state within the past year, an incredible 80 percent are college graduates.”¹³ If students who grow up in our region are going to access living wage jobs in the local economy, local leaders must do something radically different to boost our current 30% credential attainment rate.

A county investment to boost college enrollment and completion amongst historically underserved students would be catalytic. The Puget Sound Taxpayer Accountability Account (PSTAA) is a once in a lifetime opportunity to transform the landscape of postsecondary enrollment and success for historically underserved students in the region. The King County Council has named College Promise as one of nine priority areas. If structured in the right way, a “first dollar in” investment from the county could leverage funds from other sources, including:

¹⁰ Community Center for Education Results (2018). *To and Through: Community and Technical College Pathways in South Seattle and South King County*. [\[LINK\]](#)

¹¹ See for example Bellfield and Crosta (2012). *Predicting Success in College: The Importance of Placement Tests and High School Transcripts*. [\[LINK\]](#)

¹² Education Research and Data Center (2019). High School Graduate Outcomes dashboard. Accessed on April 3, 2019. [\[LINK\]](#)

¹³ Seattle Times (2019). *Seattle is most-educated big U.S. city — and 8 in 10 newcomers have a college degree*. Accessed on April 3, 2019. [\[LINK\]](#)

- Federal and state financial aid dollars, including Pell and the State Need Grant,¹⁴
- Local municipalities who have a vested interest in meeting local employer demand for an educated workforce,
- Local K-12 districts and community and technical colleges many of whom have already indicated a willingness to invest their own resources to help make the King County Promise a reality and
- Private funders including local businesses, private foundations and wealthy individuals.

The King County Promise Support System is a comprehensive and equitable strategy aimed at addressing systemic barriers to access and completion for historically underserved young people in King County. Beginning in October 2017, the Puget Sound College & Career Network at the Puget Sound Educational Service District has facilitated a highly collaborative process to develop that led to the development of the King County Promise program model. Local education leaders have made five core commitments which will help that all historically underserved students in King County have:

1. High quality, relevant support and adequate **time to explore college and career options and complete required applications and financial aid forms** during the school day,
2. Opportunities to **refresh on needed academic and non-academic skills during the senior year of high school** to avoid costly precollege courses,
3. The ability to **use multiple measures to assess readiness for college** including high school GPA, SAT/ACT scores and high school coursetaking.
4. Access to **a college success course by the end of a student’s first academic term** to support a smooth transition and
5. Reliable **access to a supportive near peer or adult** who can help students navigate the college environment.

To help districts and colleges meet these core commitments, the King County Promise features three components, which are research-based and grounded in feedback from local students and educators about the biggest gaps and barriers in our region:

Component	Service
Navigation support	<p>High school advising and navigation to help historically underserved students navigate from high school to college. Students need additional support navigating the labyrinth of college options and admission requirements. The King County Promise provides resources to improve support services at high schools that serve large proportions of low-income students.¹⁵ Funds will be allocated via performance contract based on student need.</p> <p>College advising and navigation services to help historically underserved students transition, persist through the first year, and complete a postsecondary credential. The King County Promise will enable drastic improvements to the staff to student ratio at local community and technical colleges. With enhanced supports,</p>

¹⁴ The Washington State legislature is considering legislation to fully fund the State Need Grant and make it a forecasted program. If passed, this would reduce the overall cost of a King County Promise program.

¹⁵ Collectively, these high schools enroll 80% of all Latinx high school students, 86% of Black/African American high school students and 7% of all low-income high school students in King County.

	<p>students will be better equipped to successfully navigate the path to completion. Funds allocated via performance contract based on student need.</p> <p>Intensive community-based supports to help both young people in high school and young people get “back on track” to a credential. The King County Promise would provide resources for community based organizations that provide intensive support to high school students, opportunity youth, and other underserved young people in accessing and succeeding in postsecondary education. Funds would be allocated via performance contract to CBOs who work directly with students on college access both in high school and opportunity youth in King County.</p>
Financial support	Equity stipend (for non-tuition expenses) to help young people with the greatest financial need cover living expenses like housing, childcare and transportation.
System improvement	<p>Oversight, management and cross-system improvement. In addition to enhancing student supports, a major component of the King County Promise is systems-level improvements and capacity building to ensure that K12 and CTC systems address both simple and complex barriers to student success including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-system systems improvement and commitment development, • Support to implement systems improvement, including technical assistance, coordination, professional learning, and materials creation, and • Oversight and management of performance contracts with districts, colleges and CBOs.

Model update (June 2019): The King County Promise model has evolved based on the changing landscape of higher education. Since the state legislature added funds to cover tuition for low-income students in the 2019 session, tuition assistance has been removed from the King County Promise model. Now, the student supports included in King County Promise are even more critical to ensure students can access the enhanced state tuition funds.

Significant improvements like those brought about by the King County Promise require significant investment. The Puget Sound Taxpayer Accountability Account (PSTAA) represents a once in a lifetime opportunity to make a meaningful investment in supports that can transform the lives of historically underrepresented youth in King County. From its inception, the King County Promise model has been designed to include investments from numerous funding sources. PSTAA dollars could have a catalytic effect to establish a public-private partnership that could achieve long run sustainability.

King County Promise is a natural complement to the Seattle College Promise. It is no secret that low income communities are being pushed out of Seattle into other parts of the county and the King County Promise can help ensure that the promise of a postsecondary credential does not stop at the Seattle city limits. While there are design differences between the Seattle and King County programs, leadership of both efforts collaborate closely and have confidence that they can create an appropriate integration plan when the time is right.

The design of the King County Promise emerged through an intensive planning process that engaged 100+ stakeholders including King County students and parents; K-12, college, and community organization leaders; business leaders; local and state government leaders; and national experts. The program is endorsed by the

Puget Sound Coalition for College and Career Readiness and the Puget Sound College and Career Network and supported by many partners:



To learn more and join as a supporter, visit psccn.org/king-county-promise or contact Mercy Daramola (mdaramola@psed.org) or Kyla Lackie (klackie@psed.org).