



INTRODUCTION

Federal investment in education will help the state of Washington maintain recent hard-won gains for students and families. In the last several years, we have seen increases in state investment in early learning for low-income families, significant increased investment in K–12 pursuant to the State Supreme Court order and significant new investment in higher education access including the expansion of the Washington College Grant (state financial aid), community college student guidance (Guided Pathways) and improved 2 and 4 year institutional support. We cannot let the pandemic take us backwards.

COVID recovery continues to be a time when first-time college students and unemployed adults are given the comprehensive support that they need to build marketable skills and attain postsecondary credentials. K–12, postsecondary institutions and

community organizations across King and Pierce have invested time and committed to collective action and change to support students and their educational journeys and remain engaged in this work. This is our best chance at building a truly inclusive and equitable recovery.

MEETING OUR STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS WHERE THEY ARE

When surveyed, 96% of local high schoolers from South King County indicated that they wanted to continue their education after high school. According to the most recent data from the Road Map Project, only 30% of students from this same region earn a college degree or career credential by their mid-twenties. This stark difference between students’ goals and achievements reflects the underlying reality that our school systems are not providing the support that students need to succeed.

Data from the Post-School Outcome Survey showed that only 28.19% of students with disabilities engaged in some form of post-secondary education after leaving high school in the 2020-21 school year, while 22.64% of students with disabilities were not engaged in any type of employment, education, or training programs following high school. Among students with disabilities leaving high school, disparities across racial and ethnic groups persist. The percentages of Black, Indigenous, and Native Hawaiian and

Pacific Islander students with disabilities engaged in higher education at far lower rates than their peers with disabilities of other races in the 2020-21 graduating class (CCTS, Post-School Outcome Survey, 2023).

Students — especially students of color, first generation, students with disabilities, and other students facing barriers — need individualized, high-touch support throughout high school to make a smooth transition to postsecondary and ensure that support continues throughout postsecondary to ensure students are able to attain postsecondary credentials. The current counselor to student ratio of our students is, on average, 482:1 — almost double the recommended standard. Data shows that students of color, first-generation and special education students rely more heavily on school staff when it comes to understanding the college-going process, and by 11th grade only 64% of students in the Road Map Region had conversations about college options with a school staff member. Deficits in school support disproportionately affect first generation students, students of color, and students with disabilities, thus deepening the very opportunity gap that we are fighting to close.

For students and young people:

- Regardless of race/ethnicity, school, or zip code, they should have reliable, high quality postsecondary success advising in school and community organizations,
- They and their families should be engaged, early, meaningfully, and consistently
- They should be able to explore and choose a postsecondary path and complete required applications and financial aid forms during the school day with support from adults

- They should receive high quality support making the transition from K–12 to postsecondary in a way that is more seamless, and experiencing fewer barriers, regardless of the high school they attend and the postsecondary school they choose
- Young people ages 16–26 who are not in school or working in a family wage earning job should have access to supports that navigate them back onto secondary and postsecondary tracks

To prioritize equitable support for our students, we must fund college and career planning staff that meet the recommended staff-student ratio of 250:1 in high school and postsecondary and integrate college and career planning into school curriculum, and provide funding for the strategies and resources that will support the staff and students and intended outcomes. Students must be afforded opportunities to explore careers while in high school and receive the support to begin working towards a credential.

FINANCIAL AID BY THE NUMBERS

Completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is one of the best indicators of whether a high school senior will attend college. According to the National College Access Network (NCAN), seniors who complete the FAFSA are 84% more likely to immediately enroll in postsecondary education. Yet bureaucratic verification procedures vastly reduce the number of students who access financial aid. Almost half of all low-income applicants are asked to submit additional documents to verify the accuracy of their demographic and financial information, further complicating a confusing process; as a result, only 56% of Pell-eligible students selected for verification



complete the process. Recent data from NCAN shows that just 61% of high school seniors complete the application by the time they graduate, leaving \$24 billion in federal aid unclaimed. During this process, almost half of all low-income applicants are flagged by the federal government for verification.

To fully utilize the resources available from the Pell Grant, the FAFSA process should be simplified to minimize the burden on students and families.

PLANNING FOR POSTSECONDARY CREDENTIAL COMPLETION

Supporting postsecondary success does not end with access – it ends with the successful completion of postsecondary credentials by students and young people. While improved rates of college acceptances can be an exciting achievement, we must ensure that these acceptances lead to higher numbers of postsecondary credential holders as well.

Once at college, students should:

- Take a college transition and success course within the first term to support a smooth transition
- Be connected with reliable advising and support in navigating academic and life barriers
- Receive financial support that is targeted to address barriers and is available to highest need students

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