QUICK FACTS

OUR END
Success for Each Child and Eliminate the Opportunity Gap by Leading with Racial Equity

WHO WE SERVE
King and Pierce counties, as well as Bainbridge Island:
- 35 school districts, 10 charter schools, and 2 State-Tribal Education Compact Schools
- 424,819 K–12 public school students*
- 5,000+ early learners (Early Head Start, Head Start and ECEAP state preK models)
- 291 private schools serving 48,755 students**
- 39% of Washington’s preK-12 public school students*
- 59% of the preK–12 students we serve are students of color*

WHAT WE BELIEVE
PSESD is committed to becoming an Antiracist, Multicultural Organization. Each PSESD employee supports our regional educational communities. We hold each other accountable to meeting our End: Success for Each Child and Eliminate the Opportunity Gap by Leading with Racial Equity.

WHO WE ARE
Puget Sound Educational Service District (PSESD) develops and delivers an array of services that provide instructional and administrative support to pre-K-postsecondary schools and direct service to students and families in the Puget Sound region.

We coordinate more than 100 programs in King and Pierce counties, and Bainbridge Island, through the following departments:

WHAT WE DO
In addition to providing programs and services to students and school systems across the Puget Sound region, PSESD also manages the following regional initiatives:

Puget Sound College and Career Network (PSCCN)
PSCCN removes barriers so that students of color, first generation, and students impacted by poverty in the Puget Sound region have the opportunity and support to access and obtain postsecondary credentials. We build regional capacity to increase equitable postsecondary readiness and completion across South King County and Pierce County by working with students, educators, community organizations, schools, districts, colleges and state-level organizations to organize strategies, programming and supports.

Superintendents Advocating for and Valuing Education
The superintendents of the 35 school districts and two tribal schools in the Puget Sound region are united as Superintendents Advocating for and Valuing Education (SAVE). PSESD serves as convener of this group.

Educare Seattle
Educare Seattle is a comprehensive early learning program based in White Center, serving children from birth to age five who face barriers to accessing high-quality learning. Educare serves as a community hub and early learning knowledge model for our region.

Cultivating a Racially Diverse and Thriving Educator Workforce
PSESD hosts multiple initiatives to recruit and retain educators who reflect the communities we serve. We are a regional convener of the LEADER initiative, a statewide initiative affiliated with College Spark to align community priorities, teacher preparation programs, and school districts around the goal of diversifying the educator workforce. We support a variety of regional convenings intended to strengthen district capacity to recruit community members to become teachers and to retain and support their current educators of color. Our regional Educators of Color Leadership Community, Regional Executive Leaders of Color and the BIPOC Principals’ Network provide supportive spaces for educators of color around the region at all stages of their journey.

Safety and Threat Assessment Cooperatives
The PSESD Safety and Threat Assessment Cooperatives strengthen safety, social-emotional, and threat-assessment services in school communities across the region through high-quality training, networking and coordination opportunities that are culturally responsive and trauma informed.

OUR FUNDING
Less than two percent of our funding comes from a state allocation. Our programs are funded primarily by entrepreneurial means. We apply for and receive competitive state, federal and private grants. We also operate cooperatives among schools and other agencies, which are supported through membership fees.

** Source: State Board of Education https://www.wa.gov/our-work/private-schools

Learning, Teaching and Family Support delivers opportunity-gap-closing services, professional development and resources to pre-K-postsecondary students and school systems.

Equity in Education works collaboratively to enhance and support racially equitable and culturally responsive approaches among staff, students, parents and communities, building capacity to lead with racial equity.

Administrative and Management Services provides strategic leadership and inter-agency cooperatives to support all aspects of school, administrative, business, finance, communications, evaluation, policy, transportation and human resources functions.

One of nine Educational Service Districts (ESD) in Washington state

Governed by a nine-member ESD board, elected by local school directors

John P. Welch is the Superintendent of PSESD

Employs over 360 year-round staff (administrators, educators, and support personnel), and approximately 80 – 100 additional staff, which includes interpreters, Bilingual Instructional Assistants, site substitutes, Expanded Learning after school coordinators, and program interns.

Manages multiple locations, with the main office headquartered in Renton, Washington

Reaches students, families, teachers and educators across Washington state
The continued gun violence in our schools has refocused Americans on the question of how to best protect children in our schools. Parents send their children off to school in the morning, trusting that they will return home at the end of the school day. Yet recent events demonstrate that more attention and more resources to improving school safety must be considered thoughtfully and sustained over time.

Puget Sound Educational Service District believes all children have the right to live and learn in a safe and nurturing environment. Research demonstrates that learning is enhanced when children feel safe and have their physical and emotional needs met in a healthy school environment. This includes access to healthy foods, opportunities for physical activity, clean air to breathe, and access to preventive care and health services, including mental health. These are issues that we must face as a community and work together to solve. Schools play a critical role in helping students feel safe and supported, and in providing students more intensive services and supports as necessary.

A comprehensive approach is necessary to prevent future school violence. School districts cannot independently solve this problem. Congress must act by directing resources to states and districts for school safety enhancements. School-Based Threat Assessments and to continue passing more common-sense gun safety legislation.

Schools remain the safest place for children and the significant decline of non-gun related violence in schools continues in a 30 year trend. Despite fervent efforts by school districts to protect students from non-gun related crimes, since 2018, there have been 119 shootings in American schools that resulted in death and injury of children and staff. Each day, 12 children die from gun violence in America and another 32 are shot and injured. Guns are now the leading cause of death among American children and teens. A comprehensive solution to prevent the killing of innocent youth cannot be the sole responsibility of the school community.

PSESD asks Congress to take the following steps to enhance school safety:

- **Increase funding for Title IV of the Every Student Succeeds Act.** Title IV represents a critical, sustained federal investment in successful prevention and intervention efforts.
- **Increase funding for School-Based Threat Assessment and Emergency Management for Schools.**
- **Increase funding for the STOP School Violence Act Grants.**
- **Increase identified funding for mental health counselors and services in schools.** Access to these services is a crucial component of any effort to prevent and respond to a school emergency.
- **Support standalone funding for higher education institutions to partner with LEAs to build up the school mental health personnel pipeline and to place these critical specialized support staff in hard-to-staff schools.**
- **Support continued federal funding for research to identify the root causes of gun violence and the prevention of gun violence in schools.**
- **Support increased funding to address bullying, harassment and student violence.**
- **PSESD implores Congress to pass more gun safety legislation that will:**
  - **Increase enforcement of existing gun laws.**
  - **Reinstate the ban on the sale, import, transfer, and ownership of assault weapons.**
  - **Ban large-capacity magazines.**
  - **Require thorough background checks for all gun purchasers, end the “gun-show” loophole.**
  - **Prevent individuals convicted of violent crimes from being able to purchase guns.**
  - **Prevent individuals with mental health issues from purchasing or owning a gun (18 U.S.C. 922 (g)).**
  - **Punish irresponsible gun owners.**

We cannot make our schools armed fortresses. The decision to bring police officers into schools should be determined on a school-by-school basis. We oppose efforts to bring more guns into our schools by arming teachers and administrators. Eliminating easy access to weapons and increasing opportunities for mental health care are essential steps towards mitigating the horrific reality of recurring murders of educators and children.

If we hope to prevent future tragedies at schools, we must comprehensively address both school safety and gun safety. Increased mental health services, community supports for youth, and new attitudes about violence in our entertainment must all be part of this approach. Sustainable changes require the investment of both time and resources. Federal funding is critical to ensuring schools remain the safest place for children. Now is the time to address school safety.
EDUCATOR DIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

The racial imbalance between U.S. students and their teachers is stark: nearly 80% of all K–12 teachers identify as white, while more than half of students identify as students of color. The lack of racially diverse teachers presents an urgent problem that federal policy, states, and districts can address right now. This disparity is a direct result of the disconnect between systems that recruit, prepare, and hire educators. The effects of disparate, marginalizing systems stunt efforts to achieve a workforce of educators who represent our students.

Once hired, research demonstrates that Educators of Color (EOC) are retained at lower rates than their white counterparts. They are challenged with navigating an unforgiving workplace, while simultaneously often bearing the pressure of being one of the only Educators of Color in the building. EOCs are frequently asked to assimilate into systems designed for white teachers and students that do not honor the richness of their culture and community.

Students of color and their families have expressed the need for educators who understand and effectively work with them as crucial to their success in school. PSESD’s Youth Wisdom Council and Community Wisdom Council, the NAACP Youth Council and student of color advocacy group The Root of Our Youth all identify the need for more educators of color as a key priority.

School systems that devalue EOCs have a trickle-down impact on our student population, negatively impacting their educational experiences and outcomes. At the same time, there is compelling evidence to show that Educators of Color have profound beneficial impacts on the success of our nation’s most underserved students, and in fact on white students as well. Recent research has demonstrated the positive academic and social-emotional benefits teachers of color have and their potential to bolster the academic success and well-being of all students while addressing the critical opportunity gap students of color have historically faced.

INVESTING IN A DIVERSE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE

Our educator workforce is at a critical point. Attestation over the last few years has been dramatic as educators across the board have left the profession. We believe the time is now to focus our efforts across systems to identify, recruit, and retain the educators who represent our students, understand their lives, and who embody the practices they tell us will help them learn and achieve their full potential. Federal funding can remove barriers to becoming an educator, incentivize the creation of pathways that connect our systems, and create systemic collective commitment to diversifying our educator workforce for the benefit of all our students. Specifically, we propose legislation that:

1. Incentivizes collaborations, alignment and partnerships between community-based organizations serving Black, Indigenous and Educators of Color, institutions of higher education, and school districts creating pathways into educational careers for Black, Indigenous and People of Color
2. Invests in community-based solutions in which financial support is available, accessible and controlled by community-based organizations and people they serve. Communities know best what they need and how best to use resources. It is crucial to avoid the unnecessary barriers and gate-keeping that can happen when funding is only allocated to universities and state agencies
3. Provides tuition relief, waivers, or reimbursement for Black, Indigenous and People of Color who want to pursue education as a career path
4. Provides financial support for Black, Indigenous and People of Color who need to give up full-time employment to complete student teaching requirements
5. Provides financial incentives for districts and educational service agencies to provide professional learning for all educators on culturally responsive practices, and to implement active efforts to recruit, retain, and advance educators and leaders of color, such as:
   - Grow Your Own programs for paraeducators
   - High school teacher academies
   - Culturally responsive mentoring and intentional placement for new Educators of Color
   - Affinity-based support groups for Educators of Color
   - Leadership development or mentoring programs for Black, Indigenous and Educators of Color seeking advancement
   - Implementing anti-racist hiring policies and practices
7. Incentivizes recruitment and retention of Black, Indigenous and People of Color in educator preparation programs to complete student teaching requirements

A diverse educator workforce has the potential to transform our schools into humanizing places that allow all our students to thrive. When adults of color in a school feel valued, honored, and included, the students who most relate to them will feel the same. With investment in the systems that recruit, prepare, retain, and advance our Black, Indigenous and Educators of Color, we believe policy can play a powerful role in transforming our educator workforce into one that effectively serves our nation’s students.

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2023 FEDERAL POLICY FOCUS
Shauniece

They are really about supporting the whole family.

As a single mother, Shauniece worked a full-time job while attending school in an effort to provide for her young son, Aiden. In a season where she was working dead-end job to dead-end job and moving around with other family members, Shauniece realized she wanted something different for her life. A chance meeting with a friend at the grocery store tipped her off to the opportunities available to her through the PSESD Early Learning Program and she enrolled Aiden immediately.

Aiden thrived in preschool, both intellectually and socially, but Shauniece says that what was most impactful about the program was the wealth of support programs they provide for the whole family. As she began interacting with the Early Learning community, utilizing the wealth of support programs they provide for the whole family.

As she began her schooling and Aiden begins kindergarten, Shauniece is thankful for all PSESD Early Learning has provided her, and invites them in to play and learn alongside her.

Gabby

I wish that every family had this same opportunity.

As a single mother, Gabby regularly rode three busses, with babies in tow, to get to the alternative school across town so she could get her diploma. Fourteen years later, now with four children, Gabby continues to make education a priority for her family, and says Head Start has played a big part in that.

For her two oldest, now thriving in high school and middle school respectively, Gabby credits Head Start with providing skills that prepared them for what to expect in school and setting them on a path to the success they are now having. For her youngest - whom she actually enrolled in Early Head Start while still in the womb - the home visitor provided resources about health and nutrition during the pregnancy, and helped her grow from a shy little girl to one who reaches out to other new kids and invites them in to play and learn alongside her.

Gabby has also begun playing a key role in helping others in her community get connected to Head Start and Early Head Start services, and acts as a parent leader and interpreter when needed as well.

Fatma

“Every program that supports families is actually supporting the whole country because it’s supporting our foundation. When parents feel supported in any aspect of their lives, it’s impactful in the next generation. And we have to remember the Head Start and Early Head Start teachers. Everyday, those teachers make a difference. They are the heroes.”

Fatma is now working as an Early Learning Consultant, helping caregivers to follow regulations and improve their learning how to be a better leader, to ask hard questions, and to advocate for herself and her family.

Fatma’s family has grown to four children now, and all of them have benefited from Head Start. While the kids have thrived in their individual growth, Fatma has also seen growth in herself. She says some of her biggest takeaways were helping caregivers to follow regulations and improve their leadership group and says she is learning a tremendous amount from that as well.

Elizabeth

“I value the knowledge and self-confidence I get from Early Learning and the help and resources the children get as well. Being a parent is overwhelming at times, but this program provides a support system. Your home visitor, of course, but also all the other parents who have gone through other things. It’s made me a better advocate for our family, and taught me how to take the steps to make things happen that need to happen. It’s been an amazing experience so far, and I’m glad I found it.”

Elizabeth says the fact that her daughter Kisa is even alive is a miracle. Complications during the pregnancy caused the loss of her twin, so when Kisa was born Elizabeth wanted to do everything she could to support her. That desire is what led her to Early Head Start.

Shortly after enrolling Kisa, Elizabeth and their Early Head Start home visitor, Vicki, began to notice a change; something Elizabeth describes as “the spark going dim.” Kisa had stopped making talking noises or holding eye contact with anyone. Even since then, they’ve worked together to figure out what special needs she has and how they can best support her. According to Elizabeth, Vicki has been there for her through all of it, helping connect her to Mary Bridge, going to appointments with her, and helping her get Kisa set up with Occupational Therapy, counseling and a wealth of other resources.

They are seeing positive results as Kisa continues to work on sign language, talking, eye contact and self-regulation. Elizabeth has also become involved with an Early Learning parent leadership group and says she is learning a tremendous amount from that as well.

Gabby

“My dream for my children is for them to finish high school and take another step from there and go to college or university so they can have a better future and not depend on the welfare system. Every program that supports families is actually supporting the whole family, and I feel like that is going to make a difference.”

Gabby has also begun playing a key role in helping others in her community get connected to Head Start and Early Head Start services, and acts as a parent leader and interpreter when needed as well.

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Fatma is now working as an Early Learning Consultant, helping caregivers to follow regulations and improve their services. Her biggest dream for her children is that they become responsible, respectful citizens who give back to their communities.
PSESD is the largest provider in the Northwest of Head Start – Early Head Start programs and the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), the state’s preschool program. We also operate Educare Seattle, one of 25 Educare programs across the nation. We provide child development and family support services to over 5,000 families and their children from birth to five years old.

Head Start programs serve families living at or below the federal poverty level with children who are three or four years old. Early Head Start programs serve children from birth to age three and their families, and pregnant women and their families who are also living at or below the federal poverty level. For example, a family of four makes $30,000 or less.

Demand far exceeds opportunity. Reliable short and long-term research demonstrates that Head Start works for children and families. Children who have been through the program are better prepared for kindergarten, do significantly better in school and benefit from improved family stability. Studies have even found that for each dollar taxpayers invest in the Head Start program, they receive a return of $9. These savings occur because children who have been through the program are less likely to repeat a grade in school, more likely to graduate from high school and college, and are less likely to commit a crime.

In low-income communities of color, students of color can form relationships with professionals who may share their cultural background and lay a foundation for success.

**TEACHER RECRUITMENT, LOSS, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

In Washington State, there is a $40,000+ gap between Head Start teachers with a bachelor’s degree compared to the annual salary of kindergarten teachers. We are losing high-quality teachers due to low wages and poor benefits. Inferior compensation undermines recruitment and retention, as teachers recruit a highly qualified workforce. Early childhood education has the lowest lifetime earning potential of all college majors, reducing the field’s appeal for new graduates, particularly those with significant student debt. Waiving student loans for those who commit to serve as educators for our earliest learners during their most rapid time of brain development is just one strategy to support the early childhood workforce.

Low wages and poor benefits also affect retention. Among childcare centers who experienced turnover prior to COVID, the average turnover rate is higher than 25%. Some teachers leave the field altogether, while others remain in education but seek higher-paying positions with better benefits and supports.

Federal policymakers and local grantees should continue working to increase the qualifications and skills of Head Start and other early childhood teachers. We must also consider the broader context in which Head Start teachers work, including compensation levels, quality of early childhood educator preparation programs, and the impact of trends in the early childhood landscape and K–12 teacher workforce that affect the employment market for Head Start teachers.

Early learning remains a profession in which predominantly white educators are instructing children and families who are mainly people of color, so it is imperative to consider the importance of training, recruiting, and retaining teachers of color. Increasing the percentage of teachers of color narrows the opportunity and achievement gap. Children struggle to be what they cannot see; they need to see themselves in their teachers. By recruiting, training, and retaining teachers of color, students of color can form relationships with professionals who may share their cultural background and lay a foundation for success.

**HEAL, PROTECT, AND INVEST**

Two major factors promote healing in early childhood education programs. The first is strong, trusting, and responsive relationships between parents and early childhood providers; parents and their children; and children and early childhood providers. The second is safe, consistent, predictable, and nurturing environments. Head Start programs play a vital role in supporting these factors for the children and families they serve.

We need to not only protect the investments made in Head Start, but also invest more. Early Head Start and Head Start are uniquely positioned to provide healing and learning opportunities for children and families that result in improved outcomes in school and life.

**INCREASE ELIGIBILITY THRESHOLD**

In the PSESD region, elementary school students and families who are eligible for free or reduced lunch exceed 40% of total enrollment. We believe aligning Early Head Start and Head Start eligibility with that of free and reduced lunch would better serve the children and families in King and Pierce Counties. Increasing the income threshold from 100% of the federal poverty level to align with the free and reduced lunch level at 185% would be an initial positive action towards equitable access to early learning, kindergarten readiness and support for families.

PSESD federal funding consists of three Head Start and Early Head Start grants that serve infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in a variety of program models. These include part-day preschool, school day/school year preschool, and full day/full year early learning in licensed childcare settings and family childcare homes. We serve infants and toddlers through home visiting year-round, in licensed childcare facilities and in family childcare homes full day and full year.

**EARLY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN PSESD REGION**

- 5,000+ early learners (Early Head Start, Head Start and ECEAP state preK models)
- Total Population Under 5 in Poverty in PSESD Region is over 30,000
- The number of eligible children and families for excess enrollment opportunities

**ENSURE ACCESS TO SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES IN REGULAR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS**

PSESD serve early learners not only in Early Head Start, Head Start and Washington’s state Pre-K-ECEAP, we serve children in Early Childhood Special Education and P–3 systems. We are focused on ensuring preschool students from 3–5 years old are provided special education services in their least restrictive environment. Under IDEA, young children are entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the natural or least restrictive environments to the maximum extent possible. As addressed above, PSESD has a strong system of Head Start and ECEAP program reaching many children and families in our region. This Early Learning system offers a quality context into which special education services can be embedded and is our most robust pathway to providing these services in a student’s LRE.

A key component in this work is the alignment and integration. This integration and alignment include creating pathways for sharing crucial information and funding opportunities. However, the difficult of navigating multiple regulatory requirements stemming from different funding sources has impacted our ability to create seamless systems of early intervention. This needs to overcome efforts in districts working to increase their continuum of inclusive early learning services and obstacles for families in accessing vital special education services to which their students are entitled.

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2023 FEDERAL POLICY FOCUS
INTRODUCTION

Over the past academic year, traditional models of teaching and learning have been completely transformed because of the pandemic. More than ever, it is critical to consider the impact that such dramatic changes have had on the mental health and well-being of our students and educators. Across the nation, we must recommit to providing our young people and those leading their learning with a scaffold of support to ensure that the challenges of today are met with long-term investments in their resiliency.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING THROUGH AN ANTIRACIST LENS

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which individuals build awareness and skills in managing emotions, setting goals, establishing relationships, and making responsible decisions that support success in school and in life. When implemented effectively, engaging in SEL through restorative practices can lead to safer schools, greater belonging, higher achievement, and graduation rates, improved college and career-ready skills, and achievement gains that persist over time (Taylor, O’bier, Durts, & Weissburg 2017). However, Social and Emotional Learning that is provided in absence of an antiracist lens can do more harm than good to our students of color. Failure to teach SEL within the larger sociopolitical context can make learning opportunities irrelevant to our students, whereas SEL through an antiracist approach can leverage opportunities for students to bridge differences and foster courageous conversations that confront injustice, hate and inequality.

In the classroom, Antiracist SEL humanizes learning and teaching through creating authentic connections and relationships with students, families, community, and educators. These relationships support dismantling inequities, transforming systems, and centering the healing, belonging, and thriving of adults and youth. For a pandemic that has disproportionately impacted the Black community, other communities of color and refugees intensifying the likelihood of re-traumatization for young people who previously experienced trauma, it’s critical that the social and emotional support we offer to our school communities is grounded in antiracism. Systems leaders, superintendents, school boards and educators all play a part in taking action to ensure that Antiracist SEL is infused into all aspects of school culture.

Mental Health and Antiracist Social, Emotional Learning

ADOPTION AND EVALUATION

The adoption of an SEL program represents one step towards prioritizing the social, emotional, and mental health of our students. However, it is imperative that we invest in sustained training and support for our educators to provide them with the necessary skills and resources to meet the unique needs of each student and school community. Allocating funding for continued professional development ensures that the adoption and improvement of SEL practices is an integral part of school-wide culture. Furthermore, when more educators are equipped to incorporate SEL into their curriculum and embed lessons throughout the school day, the benefits to students are even more pronounced.

YOUTH BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

While SEL and mental health have important areas of overlap, they are not the same. We know SEL can support positive mental health in many ways including serving as a protective factor which helps to protect from mental health risks. However, SEL is not designed to address mental health. An increasing number of students are in need of mental health supports to achieve success in school and life.

Behavioral health is critically important for the healthy development of our youth. There is a current and rapidly increasing mental health crisis in our schools. The number of students reporting poor mental health has increased in Washington state and nationally since 2020 and is of great concern due to short-term impacts on attendance, grades, and school completion as well as long-term impacts into adulthood.

50% of mental disorders begin by age 14, 75% begin by age 24

The time from first onset of symptoms to diagnosis is approximately 8-10 years

In 2021, 42% of students felt persistently sad or hopeless, and 20% of students seriously considered attempting suicide

Students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and students with disabilities report mental health challenges at higher rates

A focus on prevention and early intervention results in improved short-term and long-term outcomes by promoting positive relationships, healthy coping skills, school and community connectedness. Evidence based universal prevention strategies implemented in schools help mitigate the structural inequities such as racism and discrimination. When universal education and prevention is available, biases that may present with targeted strategies are eliminated and all students benefit. Prevention and early intervention strategies implemented in schools have an additional effect of reducing the number of students who might progress behavioral health challenges to developing a mental disorder, and subsequently reduce the number of students requiring clinical treatment.

Part of our current youth mental health crisis is the sharp spike in youth needing mental health services compounded by a mental health workforce shortage. Much focus is being placed on problem solving and resolving issues related to access. However, equal focus needs to occur with prevention and early intervention services. Efforts to invest in upstream services (prevention and early intervention) will lessen the flow for the need of downstream services (formal treatment).

Our youth are voicing their experiences of behavioral health challenges and demanding meaningful strategies to address the issues they face (Rescue Agency). Our school must be empowered to respond without fear of what adults perceive as uncomfortable topics, such as suicide, in order to foster school environments that are supportive of positive behavioral health. Our youth are ready for and are demanding open and honest conversations about mental health. We should not shy away from what they are ready for. Youth are ready to talk. They do not want sugar coated conversations, they are using the words adults are using; they are ready to like depression, anxiety, trauma, suicide. Our youth are asking for higher accountability from adults; they want more adults to be better equipped to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health challenges. They want teachers and other adults to know how to talk to youth about mental health concerns, and how to facilitate connection to help. Youth are asking for culturally inclusive and relevant mental health services that span the spectrum from prevention, early intervention, and to formal treatment.
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 fifth 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 student 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.

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