



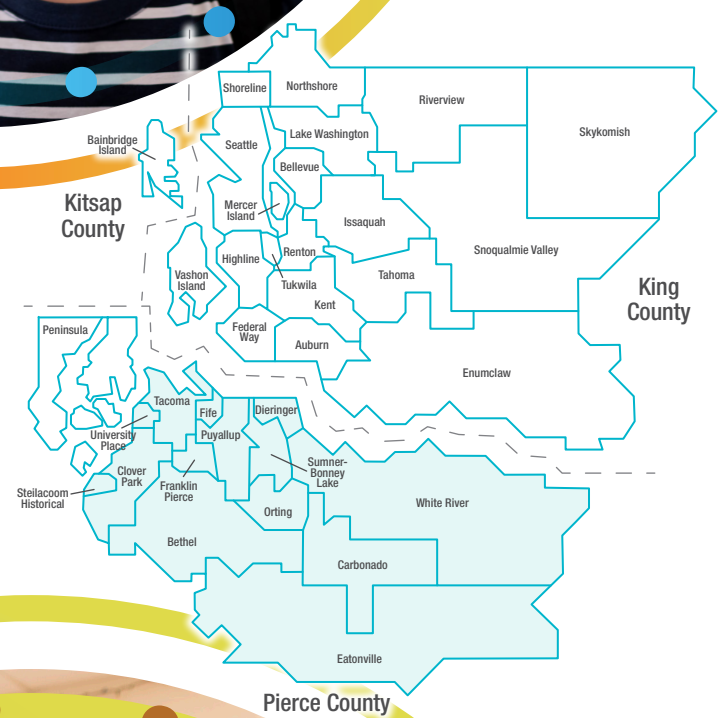
2025

FEDERAL POLICY FOCUS





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, 9 charter schools, and 2 State-Tribal Education Compact Schools
- 425,443 K–12 public school students*
- About 5,000 early learners (Early Head Start, Head Start and ECEAP state preK models)
- 265 private schools serving 45,734 students**
- 39% of Washington’s preK–12 public school students*
- 60% 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 preK–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:

- **Learning, Teaching and Family Support** delivers opportunity-gap-closing services, professional development and resources to preK–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

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 students, and those 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 effort 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 across the region at all stages of their careers.

Safety and Threat Assessment Cooperatives

The PSESD Safety and Threat Assessment Cooperatives strengthen safety, social-emotional well-being, 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 state allocations. Our programs are primarily funded 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: OSPI Report Card Enrollment 2023-24 School Year (<https://www.k12.wa.us/data-reporting/data-portal>)
** Source: State Board of Education (<https://www.sbe.wa.gov/our-work/private-schools>)

SCHOOL SAFETY



INTRODUCTION

The continued gun violence in our schools has refocused Americans on the critical question of how best to protect our children. Parents send their children to school each day, trusting they will return home safely. Yet, recent events demonstrate the need for more attention and resources dedicated to improving school safety, with a thoughtful and sustained approach.

Puget Sound Educational Service District (PSED) believes all children have the right to live and learn in a safe and nurturing environment. Research shows 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 nutritious food, opportunities for physical activity, clean air, and preventive health services, including mental health care. 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 more intensive services and supports as needed.

A comprehensive approach is necessary to prevent future school violence. School districts cannot solve this problem independently. Congress must act by directing resources to states and districts for school safety enhancement and School-Based Threat Assessments, and by continuing to pass commonsense gun safety legislation.

While schools remain among the safest places for children, with a significant decline in non-gun-related violence over the past 30 years, the threat of gun violence persists. Since 2018, there have been 119 shootings in American schools that resulted in the 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.

THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW

PSED 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 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 school emergencies
- **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 support staff in hard-to-staff schools
- **Support continued federal funding for research to identify the root causes of gun violence** and its prevention in schools
- **Support increased funding to address bullying, harassment and student violence**

PSED 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, ending the “gun-show” loophole**
- **Prevent individuals convicted of violent crimes from purchasing 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 turn our schools into armed fortresses. The decision to bring police officers into schools should be made on a school-by-school basis. We oppose efforts to increase the presence of guns in our schools by arming teachers and administrators. Eliminating easy access to weapons and increasing opportunities for mental health care are essential steps toward 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 act.

It is also important to address the more common safety concerns our students and schools face, such as bullying, harassment (including cyberbullying), and sexual harassment. We are experiencing increases in student violence, often influenced by social media, inadequate emergency plans, and insufficient safety and security measures. Too often, the focus is on reaction rather than prevention.

Students of color, LGBTQ+ youth, and students with disabilities often report higher levels of feeling unsafe, fearing they are targeted because of their identities. They also report not receiving the same level of advocacy or support from staff due to biases based on their appearance. Students of color, especially Black and Indigenous students, often feel that schools do not adequately understand or acknowledge when racism intersects with safety and violence.

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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 immediately. This disparity is a direct result of the disconnect between systems that recruit, prepare, and hire educators. These disparate, marginalizing systems hinder efforts to achieve a workforce of educators who represent our students.

Once hired, research demonstrates that Educators of Color (EOCs) are retained at lower rates than their white counterparts. They face the challenge of navigating an unforgiving workplace while 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, systems 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 the student 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 affecting their educational experiences and outcomes. At the same time, there is compelling evidence showing that Educators of Color have profound, beneficial impacts on the success of our nation’s most underserved students—and on white students as well. Recent research has demonstrated the positive academic and social-emotional benefits that teachers of color provide, 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 juncture. Attrition 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 educators who represent our students, understand their lives, and embody the practices that 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 a collective commitment to diversifying our educator workforce for the benefit of all 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 to use resources effectively. It is crucial to avoid unnecessary barriers and gate-keeping that can occur when funding is allocated only to universities and state agencies
- 3. **Provides tuition relief, waivers, or reimbursement** for Black, Indigenous and People of Color who wish to pursue education as a career
- 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. **Offers 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

- 6. **Incentivizes the recruitment and retention** of Black, Indigenous and People of Color in educator preparation programs in institutions of higher education

- 7. **Provides financial incentives for states mandating the intentional recruitment**, placement and mentoring of new Educators of Color



A diverse educator workforce has the potential to transform our schools into humanizing places that allow all 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 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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FULLY FUND THE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (IDEA)

As advocates for the educational rights of students with disabilities, PSESD (Puget Sound Educational Service District) believes that fully funding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is essential to ensuring a strong public education system that can deliver on the promise of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) as guaranteed by IDEA. Students with disabilities must receive equal access to and opportunity for the services and support they need to achieve their highest potential in education, employment, independence, and life success. Local education agencies (LEAs), including Tribal schools and public charter schools, have a legal obligation to serve all students with disabilities, regardless of the cost of services. Full implementation of IDEA, as the preeminent education law for special education, is critical to achieving this goal.

The federal government provides annual funding for the four parts of IDEA. While PSESD engages in work related to all four parts of IDEA, our efforts focus on supporting and advocating for educational services for students from age three to twenty-two. Therefore, this paper emphasizes Part B, Section 611, and 619 grants to states, as these are the predominant funding streams for special education services. LEAs, families, and educational partners continue to raise ongoing concerns about meeting special education needs as the cost and demand for services increase, staffing shortages persist, and budgets are impacted by fluctuating student enrollment.

FULL FUNDING OF IDEA

IDEA Part B includes a provision that assures the federal government will provide a substantial share of the cost of educating children with disabilities. The passage of Public Law 94-142 described this substantial share as “...the maximum

amount of the grant to which a state is entitled under this Part for any fiscal year shall be equal to...(v) 40 per centum, for the fiscal year ending September 30, 1982, and for each fiscal year thereafter, of the average per-pupil expenditure in public elementary and secondary schools in the United States....”¹ The original intent behind this provision was to ensure that states and LEAs could provide a high-quality FAPE to all students with disabilities in their least restrictive environment (LRE).

Congress determined that a fair proportion of the federal share would be 40 percent of the national average per-pupil expenditure (APPE), adjusted by the number of children with disabilities being served in the state. This figure is now known as “full funding” for IDEA Part B. While federal appropriations have increased annually, federal funding for IDEA has averaged only 13 percent of states’ costs since the passage of Public Law 94-142 in 1975. In 2021–22, over 147,000 Washington students ages 3–21 received special education services. Funding for special education services is in addition to, or in “excess” of, the full basic education allocation (BEA) available for all students. District expenditures for special education and related services exceeded federal and state special education funding by over \$400 million (or nearly 18%). This gap requires LEAs to cover over \$400 million of the excess costs of special education through local funding sources, including local levies.

Washington State’s percentage of students with disabilities mirrors national trends, showing steady growth in the number of students identified and receiving special education and related services. Last school year, 16.7% of the school-aged population in Washington state were identified as students with disabilities aged 3 through 22. The combination of a rising number of children with disabilities and chronic

underfunding of IDEA has resulted in a greater financial burden on state and local agencies and programs.

Additionally, as LEAs strive to provide equitable educational opportunities for students with disabilities, they have shifted to providing more inclusive services, which is widely acknowledged to require more funding for staff training and resources than traditional, segregated special education services. Adding to the cost of providing effective special education and related services to students with disabilities is the rising cost of recruiting and retaining highly qualified personnel. Educator shortages are a persistent barrier to effectively serving students due to wages not keeping pace with the cost of living and a lack of resources (e.g., mentoring, support personnel, curricular materials, planning, and collaboration time). Furthermore, the federal underfunding of IDEA has forced LEAs to eliminate valuable programs, extracurriculars, and support staff that are beneficial to all students.

The funding that school districts receive for special education services is not well aligned with needed expenditures, leaving some districts to rely on local levies to supplement their special education programs. Local levies are not an equitable, reliable, or sustainable funding source. In a time when state and local agencies are called on to do more with less, ultimately, it is students and families furthest from educational justice that experience the greatest effects of underfunding IDEA. Requiring states and communities to meet IDEA’s important requirements without providing the necessary federal funding leads to

difficult choices that can impact the quality of services and the range of opportunities provided to children with disabilities and their families.

Fully funding IDEA would enable states and LEAs to create the conditions that would allow all students with disabilities to thrive, including:

- Special education teacher recruitment, training, and retention efforts.
- Early intervention for young children with disabilities.
- Positive behavioral support systems for the prevention and intervention of social-emotional and mental health needs.
- Exclusionary discipline reform, including the elimination of restraint and isolation practices.
- Employment training and transition supports for a seamless school-to-postschool transition.
- Inclusionary practices to support students with disabilities with meaningful access and participation for children ages 3–22.
- Ongoing and high-quality professional development for all personnel, including general education teachers and paraeducators.

- Materials and supplies, including the purchase of specialized equipment and/or assistive technology.

Federal contributions of 40% of the per-pupil expenditures would allow LEAs to access the resources they need to implement IDEA as intended by the federal government. Full funding would strengthen state and local budgets. This would enable greater investment in school programs that support students’ academic, social, and emotional needs. Therefore, PSESD implores the federal government to uphold its commitment to fully fund IDEA, which will enable LEAs to fulfill the promise of a free and appropriate public education for students with disabilities.

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¹U.S. Congress, Public Law 94-142, Education for All Handicapped Children Act (November 29, 1975)
²64th Washington State Senate, Senate Joint Memorial 8007 (2024 Regular Session). Retrieved from: <https://lawfilesexst.leg.wa.gov/biennium/2023-24/Htm/Bills/Senate%20Passed%20Legislature/8007.PL-IDEA%20funding.htm>
³Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Fully Funding Special Education Services: 2023-25 Biennial Operating Budget Decision Package (August 2023). Retrieved from 3 Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Special Education Annual State Grant Application Interactive Spreadsheet (FFY 2024)

EARLY LEARNING



INTRODUCTION

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, as well as pregnant women and their families, who are also living at or below the federal poverty level. For example, a family of four earning \$31,200 or less qualifies for these programs.

Demand far exceeds opportunity. Reliable short- and long-term research demonstrates that Head Start works for children and families. Children who have participated in 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 at least \$9. These savings occur because children who have participated in the program are less likely to repeat a grade in school, more likely to graduate from high school and college, and less likely to commit a crime.

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 year-round home visiting, 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 35,000
- The number of eligible children and families far exceeds enrollment opportunities

RECRUITMENT, LOSS, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In Washington State, there is a \$40,000+ gap between the annual salary of Head Start teachers with a bachelor's degree and that of kindergarten teachers. We are losing high-quality teachers due to low wages and poor benefits. Inferior compensation undermines efforts to 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 serving 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 that experienced turnover prior to COVID, the average turnover rate was higher than 25%. Some teachers leave the

field altogether, while others remain in education but seek higher-paying positions with better benefits and support.

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, the quality of early childhood educator preparation programs, and the impact of trends in the early childhood landscape and the K-12 teacher workforce that affect the employment market for Head Start teachers.

Early learning remains a profession in which predominantly white educators instruct 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 become 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 we must 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.

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 a positive initial step towards equitable access to early learning, kindergarten readiness, and support for families.

ENSURE ACCESS TO SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES IN REGULAR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

PSESD serves early learners not only in Early Head Start, Head Start, and Washington's state PreK-ECEAP, but also in Early Childhood Special Education and P-3 systems. We are focused on ensuring preschool students aged 3-5 years old receive 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 mentioned above, PSESD has a robust system of Head Start and ECEAP programs 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 alignment and integration. This includes creating pathways for sharing crucial information and funding opportunities. However, the difficulty of navigating multiple regulatory requirements stemming from different funding sources has impacted our ability to create seamless systems of early intervention. This leads to obstacles for 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.

National surveys show disparities in service access based on children's racial and ethnic backgrounds and their communities. For example, data from the 2009–2010 National Survey of Children with Special Health Care Needs show that Black and Hispanic children, as well as children from other racial or ethnic groups, were less likely to receive services for developmental delays than

white children. In addition, children found eligible for early intervention services in low-income communities of color were least likely to receive those services.

Research clearly indicates that early intervention and early childhood special education for children ages birth through 5 years produce positive outcomes on many levels. Immediate benefits for the child include cognitive, language, motor, and social-emotional development, and improvements are also found for the child's family members.

When comparing 2005–2006 ECSE funding to that in 2019–2020, the percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds in ECSE increased from 4.9% to 6.1%, while federal 619 funding decreased when adjusted for inflation. Given the stagnant levels of federal funding for early childhood special education, it becomes clear that both an increase in funding and coordination of funding streams are crucial to ensuring systems that provide equitable special education services to all students in our region.

To ensure that all students receive FAPE in their LRE, it is important to consider how separate funding streams with distinct, and sometimes incompatible, regulations or requirements present obstacles to access.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past academic year, traditional models of teaching and learning have been completely transformed due to the pandemic. Now 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 resilience.

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, higher

achievement, higher graduation rates, improved college and career-ready skills, and achievement gains that persist over time (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissburg, 2017). However, SEL that is provided without 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 inequity.

In the classroom, Antiracist SEL humanizes learning and teaching by creating authentic connections and relationships with students, families, communities, and educators. These relationships support the dismantling of inequities, transforming systems, and centering the healing, belonging, and thriving of both 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 have 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.

CONNECTING AND
EMPOWERING A NETWORK
OF SUPPORT

To effectively nurture the social and emotional development of our students, we must think beyond the confines of the classroom. In the Social and Emotional Learning Roadmap for Reopening School, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) outlines the importance of implementing clear processes and structures for school staff to work with families and partner with school-employed or community-based mental health and trauma professionals. Emphasizing SEL in our school systems underscores a shift toward a whole-child approach that brings together the resources of our schools and communities to provide appropriate support for each student. Intentional partnerships with community organizations that provide culturally responsive approaches aligned with the ethnic communities they serve create a connected and supportive network.

Today's educators are more stressed than ever. Providing educators with opportunities to learn strategies to better identify and manage their stress can increase their overall well-being. Social and emotional skills not only improve academic outcomes and classroom behavior for students, but they can also have a positive impact on educators' personal and professional success. To teach SEL, we need to acknowledge and continue to develop the social and emotional skills of educators and other school staff. We must focus on

dismantling inequities and centering healing and belonging for educators and school staff. Only then can we effectively model and teach those same skills to our students. Educators need to be provided with training, coaching, and consistent support.

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 critical 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 that helps mitigate mental health risks. However, SEL is not designed to address mental health directly. An increasing number of students need 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 increased number of students reporting poor mental health in Washington state and nationally since 2020 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 22% of students seriously considered attempting suicide
- Students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and students with disabilities report mental health challenges at higher rates

Short-term and long-term outcomes are improved by promoting positive relationships, healthy coping skills, school and community connectedness, and a focus on prevention and early intervention.

Evidence-based universal prevention strategies implemented in schools help mitigate structural inequities such as racism and discrimination. When universal education and prevention are available, biases that may arise with targeted strategies are eliminated, and all students benefit. Prevention and early intervention strategies implemented in schools also help reduce the number of students who might progress from behavioral health challenges to developing a mental disorder, subsequently decreasing 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 be placed on prevention and early intervention services. Efforts to invest in upstream services (prevention and early intervention) will lessen the flow of need for 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 schools must be empowered to respond without fear of what adults perceive as uncomfortable topics, such as suicide, 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 scared to use, like depression, anxiety, trauma, and 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 and early intervention to formal treatment.

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INTRODUCTION

Federal investment in education will help the state of Washington maintain recent hard-won gains for students and families. In recent years, we have seen increases in state investment in early learning for low-income families, significant investment in K–12 education pursuant to the State Supreme Court order, and substantial 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 support for 2-year and 4-year institutions. We cannot let the pandemic reverse these advancements.

COVID recovery continues to be a critical period during which first-time college students and unemployed adults need comprehensive support to build marketable skills and attain postsecondary credentials. K–12 institutions, postsecondary

institutions, and community organizations across King and Pierce counties have invested time and committed to collective action and change to support students and their educational journeys. This is our best chance to build 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. However, according to the most recent data from the Road Map Project, only 30% of students from this 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, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students with

disabilities engaged in higher education are significantly lower 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, students with disabilities, and other students facing barriers—need individualized, high-touch support throughout high school to ensure a smooth transition to postsecondary education and continued support throughout their postsecondary journey. The current counselor-to-student ratio is, on average, 482:1—almost double the recommended standard. Data shows that students of color, first-generation students, and special education students rely more heavily on school staff for guidance on the college-going process. By 11th grade, only 64% of students in the Road Map Region had discussions 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 opportunity gap that we are striving 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 for a smooth transition from K–12 to postsecondary education, experiencing fewer barriers regardless of the high school they attend and the postsecondary institution they choose
- Young people aged 16–26 who are not in school or working in a family-wage earning job should have access to supports that help them return to secondary and postsecondary tracks

To prioritize equitable support for our students, we must fund college and career planning staff to meet the recommended staff-student ratio of 250:1 in high schools and postsecondary institutions. We should also integrate college and career planning into school curricula and provide funding for strategies and resources that support staff and achieve the intended outcomes. Students must have opportunities to explore careers while in high school and receive support to begin working toward credentials.

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 significantly 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. 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 Pell Grant resources, the FAFSA process should be simplified to minimize the burden on students and families.

PLANNING FOR POSTSECONDARY CREDENTIAL COMPLETION

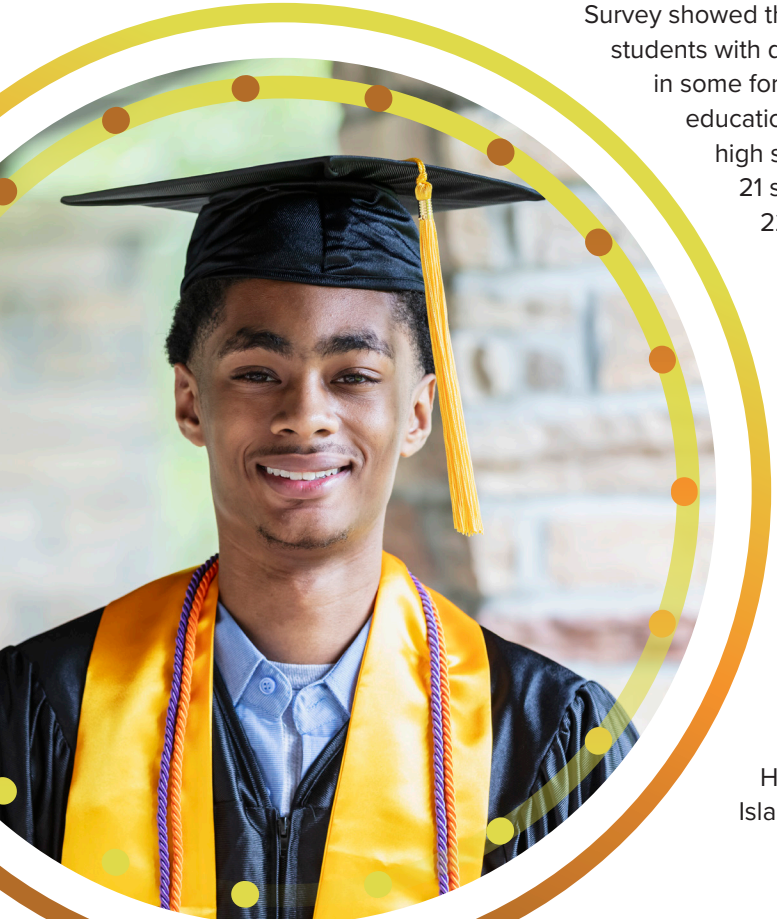
Supporting postsecondary success does not end with access—it ends with the successful completion of postsecondary credentials. While improved rates of college acceptances are an achievement, we must ensure that these acceptances lead to higher numbers of postsecondary credential holders as well.

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 to navigate academic and life barriers
- Receive financial support targeted to address barriers and available to the highest need students

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