2026

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 (PSESD) 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 common sense 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

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

- **Ensure funding for Title IV of Every Student Succeeds Act.** Title IV represents a critical, sustained federal investment in successful prevention and intervention efforts
- **Ensure funding for School-Based Threat Assessment** and Emergency Management for Schools
- **Ensure funding for the STOP School Violence Act Grants**
- **Ensure 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 the most vulnerable school communities.
- **Ensure continued federal funding for research to identify the root causes of gun violence** and its prevention in schools
- **Ensure and 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, 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))
- **Provide severe consequences to 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.

Disadvantaged students, including those with disabilities, often report feeling unsafe at higher rates than their peers. Many also feel they receive less support or advocacy from school staff, often due to biases related to their appearance or other personal characteristics. These students frequently believe that schools do not fully understand, acknowledge, or address their concerns about safety and violence.

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SPECIAL EDUCATION

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.

THE CURRENT FUNDING LANDSCAPE

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, 16.4% 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 a fair , 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-post-school 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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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 4,500 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 $35,150 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

- 4,500+ 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.

Increasing the percentage of teachers who look like the children we serve is vital to successful outcomes for children and the future workforce. Children struggle to become what they cannot see; they need to see themselves in their teachers. By recruiting, training, and retaining teachers who reflect the children and families we serve means these young students can form relationships with professionals who may share their 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 backgrounds and their communities. For example, data from the 2009–2010 National Survey of Children with Special Health Care Needs show that disadvantaged children,were less likely to receive services for developmental delays than other children. In addition, children found eligible for early intervention services in low-income communities 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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BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

An increasing number of students require behavioral health support to succeed both academically and in life. We are committed to addressing these needs with a clear purpose and providing responsive, effective support that empowers every student to thrive

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.

- Approximately 50% of mental disorders begin by age 14, 75% begin by age 24
- The average time from first onset of symptoms to diagnosis is approximately 11 years
- Only 51% of youth with a mental disorder receive clinical treatment in a given year
- In 2023, 42% of students reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless, and 22% of students seriously considered attempting suicide
- Students with behavioral health challenges are 3x more likely to repeat a grade and high school students with significant symptoms of depression are twice as likely to drop out compared to their peers

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.

When evidence-based 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 emerging 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 continuing increase in youth needing behavioral health services, compounded by a persistent mental health workforce shortage. Much of the efforts to address youth behavioral health focus on problem-solving and resolving issues related to access to clinical treatment and crisis care. 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 (clinical treatment).

Our youth are increasingly voicing their experiences of behavioral health challenges and demanding meaningful strategies to address the issues they face (UW CoLab). Our schools must be empowered to respond without reticence for 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 behavioral 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 reluctant to use, like depression, anxiety, trauma, and suicide. Our youth are asking for higher commitment from adults and want more adults to be better equipped to recognize signs and symptoms of behavioral health challenges. They want teachers and other adults to know how to talk to youth about behavioral health concerns and how to facilitate connection to help. Youth are asking for culturally relevant behavioral health services that span the continuum from prevention and early intervention to clinical treatment.

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POSTSECONDARY READINESS

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 funded financial aid), community college student guidance (Guided Pathways), and improved support for 2-year and 4-year institutions.

This remains a pivotal moment for first-time college students and unemployed adults seeking to enter the workforce. Comprehensive support systems are needed to help individuals build marketable skills and earn postsecondary credentials. Across King and Pierce counties, our K–12 districts, postsecondary institutions, and community organizations have committed to collective action and collaborative efforts that will continue to guide and support students in their educational journeys. This is the foundational work to building a resilient and strong workforce for the state of Washington.

MEETING OUR STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS WHERE THEY ARE

When surveyed, 96% of local high schoolers from South King County express a desire to pursue education beyond 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 gap between aspirations

Data from the Post-School Outcome Survey showed that only 17% of young adults with disabilities engaged in some form of post-secondary education after leaving high school in the 2020-21 school year, while 26% 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 disadvantaged students continue to persist. These outcomes highlight the need for more responsive and effective support systems. It also indicates that our school districts are not able to provide all the support that our students need to succeed.

Students who encounter systemic barriers - whether due to economic circumstances, learning needs or other factors – benefit from individualized, consistent guidance throughout high school and beyond. These students need intentional, high-touch support through high school to ensure a smooth transition to postsecondary education and continued support throughout their postsecondary journey. The current counselor-to-student ratio in Washington is 363:1—- and many students lack access to the advising they need. Data shows that students who face more obstacles, including special education students rely more heavily on school staff for guidance and college planning but only 64% of students in the Road Map Region had discussions about college options with a school staff member by 11th grade. Deficits in school support disproportionately affect disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities, thus deepening the divide in educational services that we are striving to close.

Ensuring all students have the support they need to be successful requires additional effort:

- Postsecondary advising should be accessible in both schools and community organizations, regardless of location or income.
- Families should be engaged early, meaningfully, and consistently in the ‘life after high school’ planning process
- All students should receive in-school support to explore and choose a postsecondary path and to complete required college, apprenticeship and financial aid applications.
- Student transitions from high school to college and/or workforce opportunities should be smooth and supported, regardless of the institution or work-training program.
- Young people aged 16–26 who are not in school or employed in a family-wage earning job should have access to pathways that reconnect them to education and training in their region.

Achieving these goals requires funding for college and career planning staff to meet the recommended ratio of 250:1 (students: staff member). To prioritize strong support for our students and the Washington state workforce, schools should integrate career exploration and planning into curricula and invest in resources that help staff support students effectively. Students must have opportunities to explore careers while in high school and receive necessary support to begin working toward credentials before graduation.

FINANCIAL AID BY THE NUMBERS

Completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a strong predictor of college enrollment for high school seniors. According to the National College Access Network (NCAN), students who complete the FAFSA are 84% more likely to immediately enroll in postsecondary education within one year of completing high school. However, bureaucratic verification procedures often create barriers for many students and significantly reduce the number of students who access financial aid. Almost half of all economically challenged applicants are flagged for additional documentation to verify the accuracy of their demographic and financial information. Yet only 56% of Pell-eligible students selected for additional verification complete the process. As of September 2024, NCAN reported the national FAFSA Completion rate for graduating high school seniors was just 46%. This leaves an estimated $24 billion in federal aid unclaimed annually.

Simplifying the FAFSA process to fully utilize Pell Grant resources, is essential to ensuring that students and families can access the financial support they need without unnecessary burdens.

PLANNING FOR POSTSECONDARY CREDENTIAL COMPLETION

Access alone is not enough —success must be measured by credential completion. To support students beyond enrollment requires intentional effort on the part of school districts and colleges working together:

- Colleges should offer transition and success coursework within the first term to support a smooth transition for all students.
- Students should be connected to reliable and high-quality advising and support services to navigate postsecondary life.
- Financial support and assistance should be targeted to address barriers and reach disadvantaged students and those in economic need.

By aligning resources and strategies to meet students and their families where they are, we can ensure that individuals in our state are better able to complete postsecondary credentials and contribute meaningfully to the workforce.

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