



# Establish regional innovation grants

State and regional partnerships are critical to improving educational attainment

## Recommendation

### Foster innovative and promising regional programs and initiatives (\$5 million/year)

Establish a competitive grant supporting regional efforts to create or expand educational pathways and increase educational attainment.

## The Imperative

### Regional networks can ensure more residents are competitive for today's jobs

Robust economic growth and accelerated educational attainment rely on regional efforts, responsive to regional needs and competitive advantages. The challenge is to engage broad leadership within regions to join educational leaders in developing a robust career-launch infrastructure, culture, and programming to support current and prospective students. Schools and colleges alone cannot bear the responsibility for the development and promotion of educational pathways. As students look to a broad array of community and workplace resources for information about planning, preparing, and paying for postsecondary programs, fostering collaborative regional environments for policy and program improvements is critical. Profound results are possible when communities collectively organize to increase educational attainment while addressing the unique characteristics and culture of their region.

## Context

### The regional grant will improve our understanding of how policies and practice work at the regional level

The innovation grants will be an investment in advancing Washington's social and economic development by allowing counties or regions to increase educational attainment aligned with workforce needs. Research demonstrates educational outcomes improve when highly effective communities work together to develop strategies to improve high school graduation, prevent dropouts, and increase postsecondary enrollment.<sup>39</sup> While some regions of the state have established partnerships to improve educational services, others have leveraged business and employer involvement to focus on the educational needs for emerging jobs. Across the state, local leadership is poised to collectively address regional challenges. State-level programs, policy development, and data collection and analyses can support these efforts. Together, these networks present partnership opportunities to expand efforts and apply innovative solutions to succeed at scale.

## Outcomes and Measures

### Grant funds will address equity goals by focusing on underserved populations

- Creation of a statewide coalition of engaged regional leaders and collaborative networks.
- Expanded awareness of regional needs, and active and promising regional efforts to address those needs.
- Identification of areas for improvement in state and regional policies and practices.
- Identification of programs and policies that could have a potential impact statewide or on other regions.
- Development of a statewide action agenda that includes advocating for regional and statewide programs, policies, and practices to bolster progress toward the attainment goals.

## Quick Facts:

Regional innovation strategies will help reduce geographic disparities, such as the following variations between counties:

- The highest graduation rate is 96 percent and the lowest is 56 percent.<sup>40</sup>
- The highest rate for high school graduates directly enrolling in postsecondary education is 78 percent and the lowest is 36 percent.<sup>41</sup>
- The highest postsecondary educational attainment is 69 percent and the lowest is 18 percent.<sup>42</sup>

## Key Challenge #3: Support Regional Leaders and Workforce Needs

Washington's diverse regions show large differences in educational attainment, as well as economic and workforce conditions. As an example, Cowlitz County has a high school graduation rate on par with the statewide average, with a comparatively low gap between the rates for low-income students and the overall rate (see Figure 3). And Thurston County has a very high opportunity gap, with low-income students lagging behind the overall graduation rate by 15 percentage points. Yet, among students who graduate, Thurston County sees a significantly higher proportion enroll in college (see Figure 4). These are very different problems, and local leaders are best positioned to identify and pursue possible solutions.

Systemic and statewide progress toward our goals requires sustained progress in each region. But one-size-fits-all, statewide solutions to increasing educational attainment may not best serve Washington's unique regional economies.

### Call to action for a systems approach

Sustainable momentum in improving educational attainment relies on regional efforts. The state is still a critical partner, providing investments, data, and technical expertise. With state support, regional initiatives related to increasing high school graduation, college enrollment and completion, and postsecondary capacity can lead to improved educational outcomes. The solutions to these challenges can differ by county and metropolitan area. It is possible to identify and

implement these solutions through the regional support and leadership of K-12 schools, postsecondary institutions, local businesses, and philanthropic and nonprofit organizations.

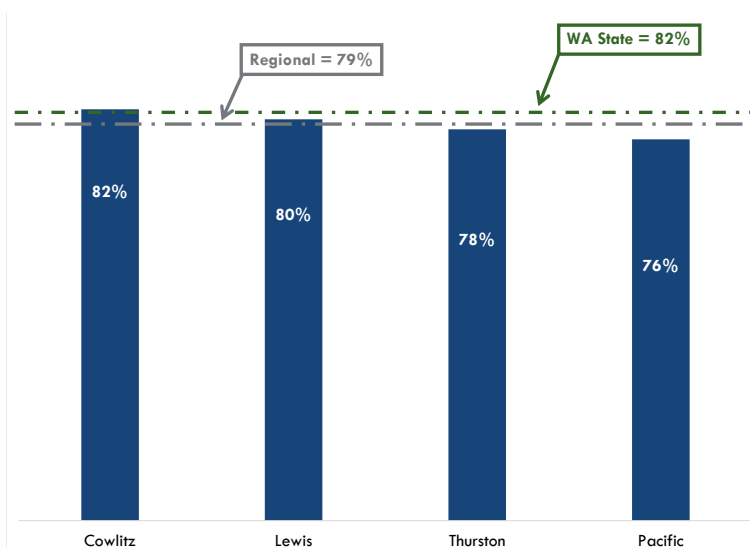
The Council supports engaging with regional leaders to develop sustainable solutions that increase educational attainment and meet regional workforce needs.

**Build a talent pipeline that meets Washington's regional workforce needs.** At every level of higher education, Washington is experiencing a gap between the annual supply of credentials and projected workforce demand. Some of the largest gaps are in the STEM fields, particularly in the areas of computer science and information technology, engineering, and health. Education is also facing recruitment and retention challenges in high-need fields and hard-to-staff schools and districts.<sup>16</sup>

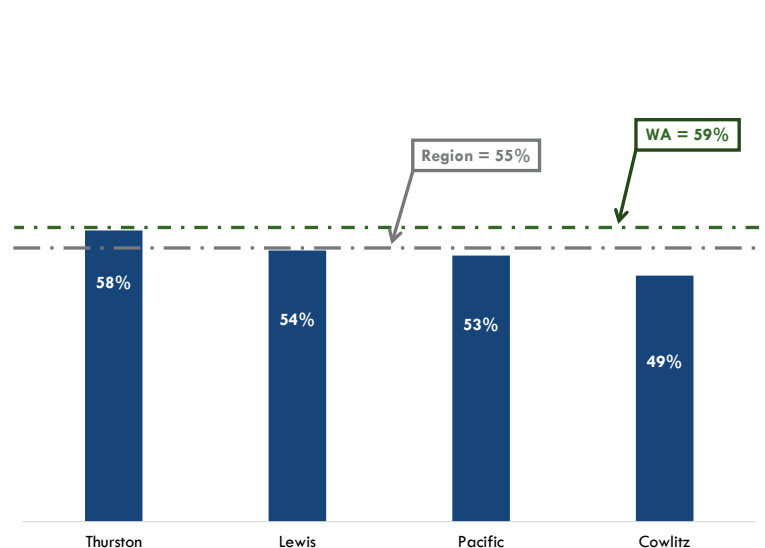
**Develop a regional innovation grant.** With state support, regional leaders can develop and implement evidence-based strategies to address the needs of specific subpopulations. Collaborative efforts with the Career Connect Washington Initiative can help address inequities by focusing on underserved populations.

**Expand career-connected learning opportunities.** Students can get valuable experience and skills in the workplace through career-connected learning opportunities, including State Work Study. Through providing training and career-exploration activities, employers can gain access to prospective employees.

**Figure 3:** Five-year high school graduation rate for class of 2016, by county



**Figure 4:** High school graduates' rate of direct postsecondary enrollment for class of 2016, by county



Source: WSAC staff analysis of high school graduation rate data from the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and High School Feedback Report data from the Education Data Research Center at the Washington State Office of Financial Management (April 2018).