

Request for Letters of Interest

The Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) is pleased to announce funding available for a new round of Regional Challenge Grants. Following the selection in 2022 of an initial eight partnerships to form the first Regional Challenge Grants cohort, WSAC seeks to invest in up to six *additional* regional partnerships working to increase student postsecondary credential attainment to 70% statewide.¹

To apply, submit the Letter of Interest Submission Form and include a Letter of Interest that adheres to the guidelines outlined on page five of this document. We encourage applicants to make use of the Letter of Interest Template, available [here](#).

Common questions about Regional Challenge Grants and this funding process are on our [Frequently Asked Questions](#) document. Please email RegionalChallengeGrant@wsac.wa.gov if you encounter a question not answered here. We will continue updating this webpage through February 9, 2024.

Newly selected partnerships will negotiate contracts that span **July 1, 2024 - June 30, 2025**, with the opportunity to request a funding renewal thereafter.

Timeline*	Date	Link (if Relevant)
Request for LOI Published	January 8, 2024	—
Information Session #1	January 17, 2024 11am-12pm PT	Register
Information Session #2	February 8, 2024 3-4pm PT	Register
Letters of Interest Due	February 16, 2024 by 11:59 PM PT	Submission Form
Discussion Phase for Selected Applicants	February 17, 2024 – April 19, 2024	—
WSAC Council Meeting	May 14, 2024	Learn More
Ideal Contract Start Date	July 1, 2024	—
Anticipated Contract End Date	June 30, 2025	—

* Dates are provided for planning purposes and are subject to change.

This Request for Letters of Interest is for new partnerships that have not yet received a Regional Challenge Grant. Existing partnerships will negotiate contract extensions with WSAC directly and therefore will not submit a Letter of Interest for continuing work beyond their initial granting period.

Read More about Regional Challenge Grants

Read about Regional Challenge Grants and the first eight partnerships on the [WSAC website](#).

Need Help Accessing the Application Process?

If you require help accessing the application process, please email RegionalChallengeGrant@wsac.wa.gov as soon as possible regarding any assistance you may require.

¹ Postsecondary refers to education beyond high school; includes but is not limited to colleges, universities, trade, and vocational programs. Credential refers to a degree or certificate; includes but is not limited to apprenticeship programs, two-year and four-year degrees, and industry-recognized credentials.

Overview

Washington’s north star for educational attainment is **70% of adults aged 25 to 44 with a postsecondary credential** that can increase their likelihood of being employed and earning a family-sustaining wage. Though there are signs of improvement in postsecondary access throughout the state—benefited by increased state investments in financial aid programs that have expanded access for all Washingtonians, and especially those historically excluded from higher education—we remain too far from our goal. Even with some of the most generous financial aid in the nation, Washington’s financial aid application rates and direct-to-college enrollment rates have not kept pace with national trends or the state’s economic needs. Furthermore, with **only 60% of adults in Washington state aged 25 to 44 having earned a postsecondary credential**, we remain nearly 10 percentage points from our attainment goal.

Regional Challenge Grant

Passed in 2022 with bipartisan support, [Senate Bill 5789](#) (RCW 28B.120.060) established the Washington Career and College Pathways Innovative Challenge Program with a \$6 million initial investment in Fiscal Year 2022-23 and a \$16 million appropriation in the 2023-2025 Washington state biennium budget. The program awards competitive grants to existing and new community-based career and college pathways partnerships to increase postsecondary enrollment and completion rates and close opportunity gaps. SB 5789 provides direct financial support for cross-sector, regionally based partnerships whose work contributes to achieving the state’s postsecondary attainment goal, especially for learners furthest from educational justice.

Since the passage of SB 5789, WSAC has built the Regional Challenge Grant program, which allocated more than \$4.8 million in its first cycle. The program is built on the agency’s engagement with diverse community members, including key voices from community-based organizations, higher education, K-12, workforce and labor, business, and industry groups. In total, more than 150 organizations have engaged with WSAC since 2022.

Our Theory of Change

WSAC believes that community-based collaborations have the greatest potential to change local context because they:

- Emerge from the needs and assets of the community.
- Leverage the skills and strengths of partners from different sectors so that local organizations and community leaders become jointly committed to changing the embedded status quo.
- Target and personalize their community outreach to best support students and families.
- Create opportunities for localized learning that is responsive to the community’s changing needs.
- Contribute to the strengthening of civic infrastructure by creating opportunities for students and families to address the community’s education challenges together.

A regional culture that values educational opportunities for all residents will improve educational attainment more than any one program or intervention. WSAC believes that the work of cross-sector

community-based collaborations can nurture this culture alongside local populations, and the combination of local work and state dollars offers regional partnerships the capacity to do exactly this. In contrast to state-level officials, local community members can shape student outcomes from a position of deep community knowledge, trust, and needs. Furthermore, a regional partnership’s learning becomes statewide learning that can ignite support for state policies that close institutional gaps in educational access and outcomes.

WSAC’s Funding Vision for the 2024 Regional Challenge Grant Funding Cycle

The vision for the Regional Challenge Grant program is to support regional partnerships that have the necessary qualities to affect change to increase postsecondary attainment in their communities. The first round of Regional Challenge Grants sought to achieve this vision by asking applicants to submit to a specific tier: partnership formation or implementation. We learned that these tiers were not reflective of the complex work that partnerships pursue, and therefore we will not require applicants to choose a tier in this cycle. Furthermore, based on our reflections on the initial application cycle, we identified three areas of emphasis that collectively capture our vision for the 2024 RCG cohort.

1. First, we will prioritize support for *emerging or forming* partnerships that operate regionally and are community centered. This emphasis on formation does not exclude consideration of established partnerships.
2. Second, our goal is to allow for substantial variation in the work that funded partnerships pursue in their initial one-year grant period, reflective of each partnership’s stage of development. Because of this desire to allow for responsive variation, partnerships are not necessarily expected to include in their anticipated work a solution or program that they intend to implement in the initial granting period. This is especially true for emerging or forming partnerships.
3. Third, we will prioritize applications from partnerships where the anticipated work for the coming year is expressly in support of *adult learners and/or credential completion* for the communities served. This emphasis does not exclude consideration of applications with anticipated work in other areas.

Because we have a limited amount of funding, we cannot guarantee that we will fund all applications that align with this vision.

Application Eligibility Criteria

An application will only be considered for funding if it meets the five criteria outlined below.

1. Focal Populations

A central purpose of the Regional Challenge Grant program is to “eliminate educational opportunity gaps for students of color, English language learners, students with disabilities and foster and homeless youth.”² WSAC also encourages partnerships to consider the broader landscape of intersectional learners in

² See SB 5789: <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=28B.120.060>

their communities who experience barriers that prevent access to educational opportunity. Partnerships must share in their applications the learner populations they intend to serve based on their context.

2. Partnership Composition

Each application must meet the minimum criteria for partnership composition, which are:

- At least two organizations, with the majority based in the region
- At least one community-based organization (see Frequently Asked Questions webpage for definition of a community-based organization)
- At least one educational entity, such as K-12 (school, district, etc.) or higher education institution

There is no limit to the number of organizations that can be part of a partnership; we expect the composition reflects an intentional effort to identify the organizations most integral to accomplishing the goals of the work. Furthermore, because we recognize that advancing educational outcomes is a goal that requires engagement from organizations beyond the education sector, WSAC highly encourages partnerships to involve entities such as employers, local government, workforce, local/regional economic development entities, or labor unions.

3. Requested Funding Amount

WSAC expects that applicants' requested funding amounts will **range from \$50,000 to \$450,000** and will reflect an intentional alignment with their anticipated work and organizational capacity to deliver on this work. Established and existing regional partnerships that seek to implement collective strategies will be at the high end of this range, and emerging or forming partnerships will be at the low to middle end of this range. As a result, selected partnerships will not all receive the same funding amount.

Although a budget submission is not required for the initial Letter of Interest submission, it will be required during the discussion phase. We expect that the budget submitted during the discussion phase for selected finalists aligns with their requested funding amount from the Letter of Interest Submission. We also expect that this budget will include an estimated distribution of funds across all partnership organizations. See page five for more on the discussion phase.

4. Application Point of Contact

All partnerships must designate an individual who will serve as the **application point of contact**. The application point of contact will communicate with WSAC on behalf of the partnership.

5. Fiscal Agent

Partnerships are required to identify an organization that will serve as the **fiscal agent**. The fiscal agent will be responsible for receiving and managing funds, disbursing funds to appropriate entities, and satisfying grant reporting requirements. The fiscal agent must have the capacity to manage public funds and maintain fiscal records.

The fiscal agent can be a tax-exempt entity; local government agencies and community-based organizations are eligible to be fiscal agents. WSAC will consider proposals for other types of entities if appropriate. Although not required, the application point of contact can be employed by the fiscal agent if appropriate for the partnership.

Application and Review Process

The application and review process has three phases. In the first phase, interested applicants will submit a Letter of Interest that addresses the required questions outlined in the Writing the Letter of Interest section below. In the second phase, WSAC will advance a limited number of applications for further review and discussion. In the third phase, selected finalists will be recommended to the WSAC Council and negotiate grant agreements with WSAC staff.

Throughout this process, WSAC may ask applicants to elaborate on or modify portions of their Letter of Interest, as well as submit additional information. WSAC furthermore maintains the right to apply additional considerations when making the final decisions for investments. This could include factors such as regional representation, the diversity of focal populations served, or statewide needs, among others.

Given the time frame and steps entailed, including a required vote by WSAC's Council in May 2024, responsiveness to WSAC requests during phase two is a prerequisite for being considered for funding.

Phase One: Letter of Interest

Applicants must submit the [Letter of Interest Submission Form](#) and upload to the form a Letter of Interest as a PDF attachment **no later than February 16, 2024 by 11:59PM Pacific Time**. To ensure formatting aligns with the below guidelines, we encourage applicants to make use of the Letter of Interest template, available [here](#).

A Letter of Interest must adhere to the following guidelines:

- No more than five pages in total length, excluding the cover page
- Cover page identifies:
 - o Partnership name (if applicable)
 - o Application point of contact
 - o Name of the organization that will act as fiscal agent
- All bolded questions are numbered and answered serially (see Writing the Letter of Interest below)
- Responses are single spaced in Times New Roman 11-point font

Note: All LOIs submitted to WSAC will be publicly available on the WSAC website in advance of the recommendations made to Council (est. May 2024).

Phase Two: Review and Discussion

Applicants selected for further review will be asked to participate in deeper conversation with WSAC staff and/or selected designees. A central goal of the discussion phase will be for WSAC to understand how the

requested funds reflect the anticipated work in a manner that is responsive to the unique context of the partnership and community. During this phase, we may request budget adjustments to ensure alignment with the anticipated work.

Applicants invited to this phase will be required to:

- Submit a draft budget with detailed projected expenditures, including estimated distribution of funds across partnership organizations
- Develop a draft Scope of Work delineating key partner organizations, tasks, and timelines for the granting period
- Engage in discussion with WSAC regarding anticipated outcomes and accompanying data required to measure these outcomes

Additionally, WSAC staff *may* request further information or context related, but not limited, to:

- Why key partnership staff/organizations are well-suited to lead the effort in their region
- How the partnership approaches internal decision making and communication
- How the partnership has or will formalize the partner organizations' relationships with each other

After the discussion phase, all applicants will be notified of the status of their application. Unfortunately, we will not be able to provide detailed feedback on applications at this time.

Phase Three: Council Approval and Grant Agreement Negotiations

In the third phase of the application process, a list of finalists will be brought to the WSAC Council for final approval and, with Council approval, will negotiate grant agreements with WSAC staff. During this phase, all applications will be made publicly available on the WSAC website. We will invite and encourage finalists to attend the hybrid WSAC Council meeting where new funding will be approved (anticipated Tuesday, May 14, 2024; virtual registration will be available at wsac.wa.gov/2024-meetings and we will notify finalists when registration opens).

Our anticipated start date for new grant contracts is July 1, 2024.

Writing the Letter of Interest

The Letter of Interest should not exceed five pages, excluding the cover page, and should respond to the required, bolded questions outlined in the three sections below. A template is available [here](#).

Section 1: How the Partnership Functions

How communities come together to change the reality for their learners depends on their context. WSAC believes that when a partnership emerges from community needs and assets, its structure reflects this context. For this reason, even as funded partnerships may vary in their operational approach, each one is a cross-sector collaboration. The partner organizations should share a common goal of improving educational attainment for their communities and align their cross-organizational work with this goal in mind. Partnerships furthermore have the greatest potential to effect change when they establish a

shared and equitable approach to decision-making, and when they commit to leveraging ongoing learning as an opportunity to improve.

Required Questions

Applicants **must** answer the following questions in their submission (est. 1.5 pages):

1. **Why are the partner organizations that are or will be included in this work the ones that came together to address educational attainment through place-based work in your region?**
2. **How is or will the partnership be structured?** We do not expect a statement of each organization’s role, but instead details about how your partnership collaborates, its intended or practiced approach to decision-making, and whether the partnership anticipates recruiting new members during the granting period.
3. **How have or will the partner organizations learn from each other and the communities served, and how does or will the partnership incorporate this learning into ongoing work?**

Section 2: How the Partnership Maintains Community Responsiveness

Regional Challenge Grant partnerships work to address historic inequities in education and close opportunity gaps through approaches that demonstrate cultural competency and community knowledge, including through self-reflection and continuous learning. These partnerships understand that advancing educational outcomes requires work that is not just about learners, but about *learners in the context of their communities*. This community responsiveness can take many forms in regional partnerships, whether through the leadership of people and communities most impacted by the work, intentional and ongoing trust building and collaboration with these communities, or both. Whatever form community responsiveness may take, its success is measured by how well the partnership understands and is responsive to the needs, assets, and strengths experienced by the focal population(s) in its region.

Required Questions

Applicants **must** answer the following questions in their submission (est. 2 pages):

4. **Who are the focal population(s) in your partnership’s work, and what assets do learners and families in these populations bring to their educational journeys?** For example, assets may include the languages spoken at home or in community spaces, the social connections that bind the community and/or region, or cultural practices and norms observed within the region’s communities. In answering this question, please identify how your partnership has directly engaged the focal population(s) to build an understanding of these assets.
5. **What is the geographic region where the focal population(s) that would be served by this investment live?** We do not provide a prescriptive definition or requirement to how a local community defines their region. We understand that this can look like pre-existing boundaries that influence our daily lives, such as counties, school districts or city boundaries. We also welcome other geographic considerations, such as mountain passes, neighborhoods, or cultural boundaries.

6. **What are some of the systemic barriers that learners and families in your focal population(s) encounter?** These barriers may result from the region’s distinct cultural, socioeconomic, and political history, as well as its defining geographic features. In answering this question, please identify how your partnership has directly engaged the focal population(s) to build an understanding of barriers.

We encourage applicants to respond to these questions using qualitative evidence learned through direct engagement with the focal population(s); quantitative measures of inequitable outcomes for these same populations can supplement this evidence as needed.

Section 3: The Partnership’s Anticipated Work During the Granting Period

As noted above, funded Regional Challenge Grant partnerships must work to advance educational outcomes and close opportunity gaps in their region. Beyond this requirement, we anticipate that there will be substantial variation in the work that partnerships propose for the initial one-year grant period. WSAC expects that proposed activities will be reflective of the learners and families in the focal population(s), the region where these learners live, and the partnership’s current stage of development. Stages of development can include emerging partnerships that are recruiting or retaining new partners; partnerships that are still emerging but beginning to pilot implementation work; and established partnerships that may seek to implement a new strategy building on their existing efforts.

Required Questions

Applicants **must** answer the following questions in their submission (est. 1.5 pages):

7. **What work do you propose undertaking during the granting period?** We expect that this work is grounded in the Regional Challenge Grant’s long-term vision of increasing educational attainment.
8. **How will this proposed work contribute to increasing educational attainment for the focal population(s) in your region?**

Questions?

WSAC encourages potential applicants to work with the agency to discuss components of the application where they may have additional questions or need support (RegionalChallengeGrant@wsac.wa.gov). In most instances, applicants’ questions and WSAC’s answers will be incorporated into our [Frequently Asked Questions](#) for the 2024 Request for Letters of Interest. Additionally, WSAC will host two informational webinars on the 2024 Request for Letters of Interest. We strongly encourage interested applicants to attend one of these two webinars:

- Wednesday January 17, 11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. ([Register](#))
- Thursday February 8, 3:00 – 4:00 p.m. ([Register](#))