



Regional Partnerships Learning Brief #1

Leveraging State Funds to Change Systems Through Regional Partnerships

November 2024

Our Commitment to Systems Change

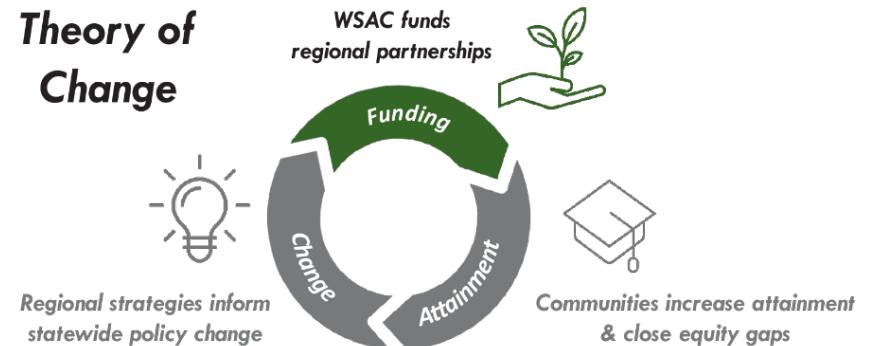
The Washington Student Achievement Council's (WSAC) Regional Partnerships (RP) strategy invests in cross-sector partnerships that are committed to increasing local postsecondary attainment through geographically and culturally responsive approaches. RP elevates place-based approaches as a meaningful strategy for creating an educational system that works to help all learners succeed. The approaches funded by RP are built for and by local partnership networks because those closest to and most impacted by inequitable systems are best positioned to identify and operationalize what will prove effective in their communities.

RP contributes to an education system built for all learners by:

- ✓ **Changing how state programs and policies allocate resources.** RP's founding legislation, SB 5789, directly invests in place-based partnerships as essential to addressing educational inequities.
- ✓ **Centering cross-sector partnerships, not siloed solutions.** Disconnected strategies that address only one dimension of a complex problem are unlikely to create enduring social change. Cross-sector partnerships champion the power of collaboration, which diminishes the influence of sector-based perspectives that leave us operating in silos even when we work together.

- ✓ **Reallocating power and resources to the partnerships, communities, and individuals who are at the center of the work.** Partnerships know how to show up for and in their communities, and we lead with this trust and positionality in grantmaking processes and a shared leadership model.
- ✓ **Co-developing policy alongside regional partnerships to create statewide systems change from a place-based lens.** Through collaborative learning and policy development, we can surface systemic barriers that are most effectively addressed through state and local policy or through changes in agency-level practices.
- ✓ **Shifting mental models so that learners believe postsecondary pathways are built for them.** Even with tangible improvements to policy and practice, learners' beliefs about educational opportunity are still grounded in lived experiences and social narratives. Place-based partnerships are powerfully positioned to rebuild learners' trust in education and, in so doing, shift these mental models.

Theory of Change



Learning Brief 1: Leveraging State Funds to Change Systems through Regional Partnerships

In this first installment of the RP Learning Brief Series, we surface critical lessons, decisions, and improvements that WSAC has made in its early programmatic implementation.

Application processes must continue to be adapted based on community leaders' feedback.

As a state agency, WSAC has much to learn from regional partnerships about what it takes to best support place-based communities. For this reason, our success depends upon our ability to adapt our processes based on feedback from community leaders.

When community members shared that our initial application was both onerous and insufficiently attentive to partnerships' strengths, we changed the process to better reflect our program's values.

- We shortened the page limit, and clearly identified which questions each applicant was expected to answer, and how questions connected to the evaluation of their proposed work.
- We included a funding vision so partnerships knew the focal populations and strategies that we sought to prioritize.
- We formalized an application Discussion Phase to build learning about prospective work and grow relationships with applicants.
- We removed tiered funding opportunities to better reflect the spectrum of collaboration we observed in regional partnerships.

- We formalized a two-year granting period to better support our long-term goal of shifting regional mental models and systems.

Focusing our application process on community-centered practices created space for partnerships to authentically communicate from a position of local expertise. Furthermore, by centering partners as experts of their communities, we empower truly local strategies for increasing educational attainment.

Grant reporting is purpose-built to center relationships and surface community impact.

Our reporting requirements ensure that investments are spent with accountability and transparency. That partners are good stewards of public dollars is a necessary condition, but demonstrating the power of state investments in place-based models requires reporting that is grounded in both learning and trust.

RP integrates reporting requirements so that learning occurs alongside standard reporting timelines. At each reporting milestone, we actively reassess what we ask of partnerships and how our requests impact their time and resources. Every question we ask—and every reporting requirement—is aligned with our Theory of Change. This allows us to continuously highlight how partnerships are leveraging state dollars for local impact while minimizing the time required to do so.

RP Learning Brief #1: WSAC Funds Regional Partnerships

- For written reporting (inclusive of expense reports, financial narratives, and activity tracking), WSAC uses templates that meet state accountability standards without compromising partnership accessibility.
- Narrative reporting occurs through facilitated partner-led conversations whenever possible. This oral reporting model benefits from the trusted relationships between agency staff and partnership colleagues. Furthermore, it allows for richer learning than often occurs in traditional written reporting.
- Program staff and community partnerships build relationships informally, through monthly or quarterly check-ins. These check-ins are critical avenues for agency *and* partnership learning that centers system change and asset-based framing.
- Program staff work closely with colleagues across WSAC to support whole communities through a variety of resources beyond direct granting through RP.

Our reporting approach stems from a trusted philanthropic model: RP builds trust with regional partners and this trust allows WSAC to champion the value of strong partnership networks.

Each partnership co-designs with WSAC outcomes that capture their place-based theory of change.

Beginning with the 2024-25 academic year, all thirteen RP partnerships will report on short-term outcomes that demonstrate

each partnership's progress relative to the goals of their work. These outcomes are co-designed with WSAC staff within the first six months of a partnership's granting period. We empower partnerships to determine their outcomes—and identify their sources of evidence—because a top-down approach to measuring impact would be antithetical to RP's place-based vision.

We uphold three principles when co-designing short-term outcomes:

- Outcomes are only useful if they are in the direct path of a partnership's learning and adaptation. Put simply, if it is not useful for their strategic development, WSAC does not want to measure it. Likewise, if the partnership already monitors a similar outcome for related work, then we welcome it.
- Outcomes can and should champion the assets of the learners and communities that they support. The best way to do this is by involving communities in the design process.
- The definition of evidence is broader than what is implied by traditional indicators of educational progression. Evidence should include learners' and families' stories that are often embedded within population-level cultural traditions, Key Performance Indicators, or the partnership's collective feedback.

With thirteen partnerships monitoring between three and five outcomes, RP will gather annual evidence of impact through more than 40 unique short-term outcomes. These outcomes vary in their sources of evidence (i.e., focus groups, surveys, administrative data) and unit of analysis (i.e., individuals, schools, or communities).

Regardless of this variation, each one is specifically reflective of the partnership's temporal and geographical context.

As part of our long-term strategy for understanding RP's effects across the state, we continuously monitor legislatively mandated student population outcomes for regions served by RP investments, including disaggregated district-level data on high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment, and postsecondary completion. These outcomes, which we report on annually, do not yet include academic years in which RP-funded work occurred. Furthermore, improving population-level outcomes is a task bigger than any one partnership or any one academic year.

Increases in statewide educational attainment are precipitated by local improvements in educational outcomes, which means our earliest bellwethers of success will not appear in population-level outcomes but in measures of continuous improvements that honor community ways of knowing. Co-designed short-term outcomes match the urgency of the work by capturing and celebrating positive impacts early and often. This contextualized learning also becomes a catalyst for the field—and leaders nationwide—to invest in, learn from, and build upon the evidence-informed and results-oriented strategies that regional partnerships pioneer.

Our Vision is More than Funding

The vision of Regional Challenge Grant builds from our agency-wide vision that positions Regional Partnerships as a vehicle for systems change. Funding regional partnerships is one component of this vision—as is connecting partnerships with broader agency work to

support college and career pathways and learning alongside partnerships for future statewide policy change.

Our own positionality motivates us to re-center power and resources within regions and communities. We are a state agency that sits in the Governor's Cabinet, and, from this vantage point, we can yield innovative change within the public sector by taking a regional approach to state investments. Whether we are successful in this work depends on how well we carve out a unique administrative path in which we hybridize the practices of private funders with trusted philanthropic approaches, uplift local non-profits that center grassroots approaches, and uphold our traditional public sector role of ensuring transparency and accountability. We are accountable to taxpayer dollars, we are transparent to the Governor and legislators in reporting and practice, and we are steadfast in our commitment to connecting eligible learners to the nation's most generous and equitable first-dollar promise program: the Washington College Grant.

Implicit in the Regional Partnership vision is WSAC's commitment to walking alongside partnerships as they pursue transformative systems change in their communities. Partnerships will see shifted mental models in their local community where all their learners feel implicitly as though postsecondary options are built for and meant for them, and WSAC as an agency will shift its own mental model, where the public sector can engage in innovative work, and where regional partnerships can inform greater change across all divisions of an agency, inclusive of state financial aid. This co-learning and co-shifting are necessary for the systems change required to reach the state's postsecondary attainment goal.

The RP Learning Brief Series

The 2024 RP Learning Briefs highlight the learning and impact that WSAC has begun to surface as Regional Challenge Grant partnerships deepen their place-based efforts to increase postsecondary attainment. Briefs follow the RP Theory of Change that exemplifies the impact cycle of this approach. Briefs include:

- Brief #1: Leveraging State Funds to Change Systems Through Regional Partnerships
- Brief #2: Partnerships are Creating Systems Change in their Communities
- Brief #3: What Partnerships Teach us about Place-Based Policy Change

RP's Theory of Change

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 the creation of state policies that close institutional gaps in educational access and outcomes.

About the Washington Student Achievement Council

The Washington Student Achievement Council is committed to increasing educational opportunities and attainment in Washington. The Council has three main functions:

- Lead statewide strategic planning to increase educational attainment.
- Administer programs that help people access and pay for college.
- Advocate for the economic, social, and civic benefits of higher education.

The Council has ten members. Four members represent each of Washington's major education sectors: four-year public baccalaureates, four-year private colleges, public community and technical colleges, and K-12 public schools. Six are citizen members, including two current students (one graduate student and one undergraduate student).

If you would like copies of this document in an alternative format, please contact the Washington Student Achievement Council at:

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