



Regional Challenge Grant Learning Brief #2

Partnerships are Creating Systems Change in Their Communities

Part 1

December 2024

Our Commitment to Systems Change

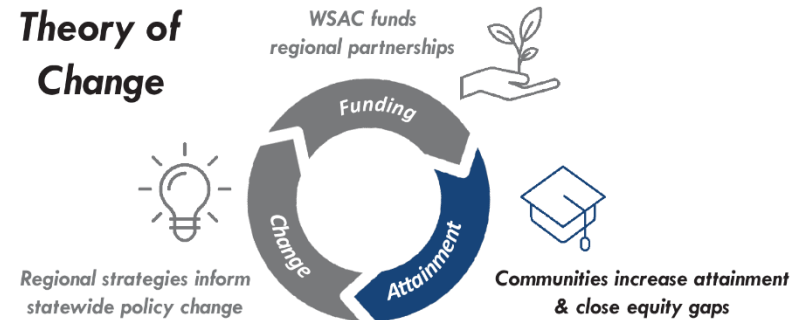
The Washington Student Achievement Council's (WSAC) Regional Partnerships (RP) strategy invests in cross-sector partnerships that are committed to increasing local postsecondary attainment through geographically and culturally responsive approaches. RP elevates place-based approaches as a meaningful 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 2: Partnerships are Creating Systems Change in Their Communities

In this second installment of the RP Learning Brief Series, we share themes of systems change in regional communities. This brief is grounded in local evidence from the first cohort of partnerships who began their funded work in the 2023-24 academic year.

Regional partnerships identify their given strategies informed by their embeddedness in the community and the trust they have established. The first eight partnerships, defined by specific geographic boundaries and student-focal populations, represent eight unique hypotheses for what it takes to drive postsecondary attainment using place-based methods.

The cohort included in this brief consists of four emerging partnerships and four partnerships beginning strategic implementation. During the first grant period, the emerging partnerships of the Methow Valley School District (MVSD), The STEM Foundation, United Way of the Blue Mountains (UWBM), and Yakima Valley Partners for Education (YVPE) all prioritized building their network. Meanwhile, Cornerstone (led by Chehalis School District), Foundation for Tacoma Students (FFTS), MPower (led by LaunchNW), and The Seattle Postsecondary Success Network (PSSN, led by the City of Seattle’s Department of Education and Early

Learning) all began implementing strategies in their local communities.

Legislatively mandated reporting on educational outcomes will not include students served by RP investments until fall 2025 at the earliest.¹ Rather than wait for lagging indicators to demonstrate impact, this brief highlights early indicators of systems change-related progress observed during the first academic year of RP investments.

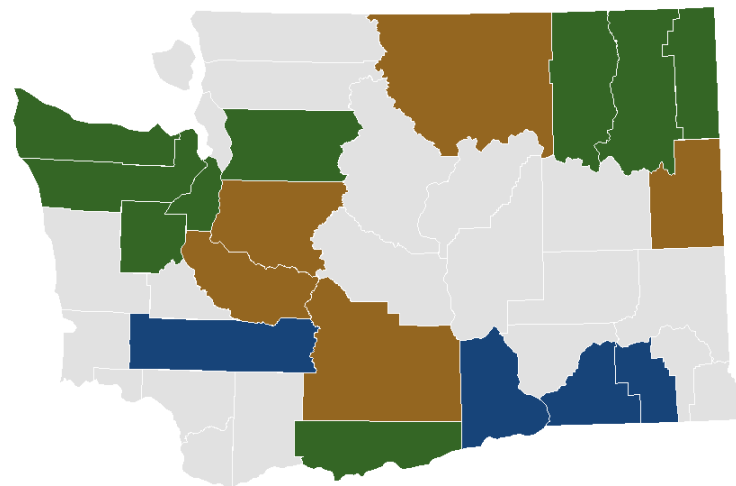


Figure 1: All partnerships to date by county. Blue indicates Cohort 1 (2023), green indicates Cohort 2 (2024), and gold includes partnerships from both cohorts.

¹ WSAC reports to the Legislature annually on high school graduation, direct-to-college enrollment, and college completion for regions served by RP investments. Graduation rates for high school seniors during the 2023-24 academic year (first year of RP implementation) will first appear in the 2025 legislative update.

Partnerships are helping increase FAFSA filing rates despite a tumultuous roll-out year.

Washington’s rate of completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) remains one of the lowest in the country, with only half of students applying for financial aid.² Low FAFSA completion rates were exacerbated by the 2023-24 Federal Simplification Act, which overhauled the system and caused a several-month delay as families tried to complete this critical form to receive aid. This caused greater social inequities for postsecondary access, especially for families with mixed-documentation status who experienced additional technical delays associated with not having a Social Security Number.³ Affordability, access, and awareness are significant structural barriers that prevent Washingtonians from enrolling in career or college pathways.

Although the disruptions that accompanied the 2023-24 roll-out of the FAFSA Simplification had clear consequences for filings nationwide and within Washington State with downward year over year trends, regional partnerships were still able to positively impact filing rates in their communities.

In the Mabton School District, with support from **Yakima Valley Partners for Education (YVPE)**’s tax preparation events, the district went from 22 percent FAFSA completion to 60 percent in less than two months during the first year of the Federal Simplification Act.⁴

The district has a student population that is nearly 100 percent Hispanic/Latino, and 45 percent of students are migratory.⁵

The partnership sees FAFSA completions within a larger context, “It’s not about the application itself, it’s about the preparation socially, culturally, economically, and academically, that happens from Kindergarten on and the things that affect that, such as housing and food,” says David Wise at Heritage University. “If it was just about completing the FAFSA, we’d sit every high school senior down in a room and say, fill out the FAFSA.”

YVPE understands FAFSA completion is not as simple as completing a form. As a result, they sequence intentional community events that are place-based in the middle and lower valley. Families receive income tax support alongside warm meals and support from cross-sector community leaders. Community leaders operate in their own roles at local institutions of higher education or community-based organizations, and they show up in the community as neighbors. Wearing many hats, leaders help students complete FAFSA forms outside of their respective title or institution. The partnership shows up because the trust they’ve established in their community means that when you are called on, you show up to support. Despite families experiencing systemic barriers because of the Simplification Act, the partnership champions the assets of their community with FAFSA completion rates higher than the state average.

² National College Attainment Network’s FAFSA Tracker. <https://www.ncan.org/page/FAFSATracker>.

³ Douglas-Gabriel, D. (2024, July). FAFSA mess leaves mixed-status families in limbo as school year looms. *The Washington Post*.

⁴ <https://wsac.wa.gov/fafsa-completion>. Washington Student Achievement Council FAFSA Completion Dashboard.

⁵ See OSPI’s Washington State Report Card. <https://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/100137>

In Tacoma, there are additional signs of success: ninety-one percent of the class of 2023 graduated on time. Despite challenges caused by the FAFSA Simplification Act, FAFSA completions increased by 8 percentage points from 2023 to 2024, a promising sign of the work of **Foundation for Tacoma Students (FFTS)** and many other community partners.⁶ Through the Campaign Free Aid (CFA) strategy, FFTS builds community capacity to support students in filing the FAFSA. Completing the FAFSA is a community effort and engages four school districts and a broad network of partners in CFA. Over just a three-month period, FFTS trained more than 100 community-based financial aid practitioners on the FAFSA application changes.

With the 2024 FAFSA rollout already underway, the partnership understands the value of sustaining community momentum for future students with FFTS Executive Director Dr. Tafona Ervin acknowledging, “We need certified individuals who year over year have consistency and continuity of understanding what their role is, what their value is, and contribution to the community that they serve, and that the ecosystem has scalability.” FFTS partner organizations provide direct service support and leverage their existing relationships with the community to be a larger support system for students entering college or career pathways.

Notably, this highlight centers on FAFSA completions within the federal context of the implementation of the Simplification Act. Absent from this conversation but ever-present within all RP communities is WASFA, or the Washington Application for State

Financial Aid. This state financial aid application, administered by WSAC, is available to any learner who is otherwise ineligible for the FAFSA, including due to their documentation status. WSAC did not observe similar challenges administering the WASFA over the same period, and as a result, we do not center our discussion on partnerships navigating barriers due to the WASFA in this learning brief.⁷ As we look ahead to FAFSA and WASFA completions in the 2024-25 academic year, we will continue to listen to regional partnerships who are on the front lines of financial aid support and echo this learning for greater change at our state agency.

Fostering a sense of belonging for learners in postsecondary spaces is critical to partnerships.

WSAC defines postsecondary as any post-high school pathway of value, inclusive of two- and four-year degrees, apprenticeships, and shorter-term credentials. Existing narratives have caused a sense of exclusion for learners who either perceive postsecondary as narrowly focused on four-year public opportunities, or who perceive themselves as not belonging in traditional pathways due to historic exclusion.

Fostering a sense of belonging for learners in postsecondary spaces foremost requires that these spaces become more welcoming. To become more welcoming, postsecondary spaces will need structural changes—in policies, practices, and resource allocation—that

⁶ See Washington Student Achievement Council Strategic Action Plan Dashboard. <https://wsac.wa.gov/sap-dashboard>

⁷ For additional details on the challenges with last year’s FAFSA roll-out, see: Knox, L. (2024, September). The Long-Awaited FAFSA Autopsy is Here. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/student-aid-policy/2024/09/24/gao-releases-initial-findings-fafsa-investigation>

RP Learning Brief #2: Communities Increase Attainment & Close Equity Gaps

functionally improve educational spaces so that they work for all learners. However, absent intentional efforts to rebuild trust with those excluded, these functional improvements will not shift learners' sense of belonging. This is work that regional partnerships are powerfully positioned to do.

In rural Okanogan County, the **Methow Valley School District (MVSD)** honors students' individual interests in one of their two high schools by utilizing the Big Picture Learning methodology. They support learners who would benefit from real-world learning through internships and apprenticeships. In one example of this, MVSD partners with the Western Washington Sustainability Pathways program, which offers local high school students and current college students near-peer, earn-to-learn activities in the summer. This opportunity shifts a student's impression of what "college" can mean through hands-on and experiential learning, where students help build trails and learn about wildfire's impact on the landscape to gain CTE dual credits.

By supporting learners in identifying a pathway bespoke to their goals and journey, the partnership helps learners feel like they can make educational decisions that fit their interests and preferences. When learners are equipped to make decisions that fit their interests and preferences, the partnership believes they are more likely to pursue and achieve their long-term educational and career goals.

The City of Seattle's Post Secondary Success Network (PSSN) includes many partners, such as Mentoring Urban Students & Teens, Empowering Youth & Families Outreach, El Centro de la Raza, and Project Baldwin. Mentees pair one-to-one with mentors who support their personal and educational pathway development. The

partnership hypothesizes that when mentorship is provided through this culturally responsive approach, students are more likely to enroll and persist after high school. To date, more than 150 high school juniors, seniors, and college first-years have met regularly with mentors, participated in cohort enrichment activities, and attended workshops focused on college and career readiness and positive personal identity development.

In Chehalis School District, **Cornerstone** serves both early and primary-age learners and their parents and guardians. This two-generation approach demonstrates that postsecondary pathways are possible for everyone. As parents seek preschool opportunities or parenting support workshops, they also receive support exploring re-engagement with their own educational pathways and assistance with basic needs. In its first year, of the 87 parents connected with Cornerstone, 13 parents have re-entered a postsecondary training program. In addition to these individual parents earning credentials, the partnership hopes to see this investment in both young children and their parents translate into increased trust between families and the early learning through postsecondary educational systems in their region.

Innovative, regional strategies are bolstering capacity-constrained school districts to better serve learners.

RP's vision is that increasing the postsecondary attainment rate is not just exclusive to the classroom, but includes activities where families live, work, and reside. By working in partnership with local

RP Learning Brief #2: Communities Increase Attainment & Close Equity Gaps

school districts, regional partnerships can provide innovative student and family supports that increase school district capacity.

The **STEM Foundation** partnership supports the rural Kiona-Benton City (Ki-Be) school district (1,409 K-12 student population) just west of the Tri-Cities metropolitan region. The partnership uplifts the existing work in Ki-Be to support whole family systems in the school district through career options, postsecondary pathway support and for parents' and guardians' own education and career development.

Core to the partnership's success is a close relationship between the partnership members and the superintendent. When Ki-Be's Director of Special Services and Migrant-Bilingual Programs identified a greater need for dual language supports in the school district, the partnership created an ESL program for parents and scheduled it outside of the families' work hours. This was a direct ask from parents. "We know what we want, we know what we need. If you could help us with this, then we can make it happen," says Cynthia Alvarez, Director for K-12 Partnerships at Columbia Basin College, describing conversations with local families.

In Spokane, **the MPower** partnership implements site-based mentoring with wraparound supports to help students with their postsecondary planning. Recently, having identified a need for culturally responsive support for Marshallese students, the partnership added Marshallese as a language to the automatic attendance notification system within their largest school district, along with 11 other languages. A system that once only

communicated in English is now able to reach families in their native language and support students on their educational journey.

Eliminating systemic barriers and combining that with mentoring relationships is a promising approach given that (a) mentoring is an evidence-based strategy to boost regular attendance rates,⁸ and (b) lack of belonging and connection to school has been identified as a risk factor for low attendance among Marshallese students and the most marginalized student populations in Spokane.

In the greater Walla Walla region, the **United Way of the Blue Mountains** partnership is implementing place-based community advisory groups to center parent and student voices within their local education ecosystem. By implementing this strategy in collaboration with rural school districts, the UWBM partnership plans to, over time, support changes in students' post-high school plans to obtain a credential. The advisory groups are led by a trusted Community Advocate and this approach will inform greater development of the partnership, providing an opportunity to share information about all postsecondary pathways, and promoting student agency over their decision-making.

⁸ Guryan, J., Christenson, S., Cureton, A., Lai, I., Ludwig, J., Schwarz, C., Shirey, E., & Turner, M.C. (2020). The effect of mentoring on school attendance and academic outcomes: A randomized evaluation of the Check & Connect Program. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 40, 841-882.

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).

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Mail:

P.O. Box 43430

Olympia, WA 98504-3430

Phone:

360-753-7800

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