From Statewide to Personal: The Power of Customized College and Career Outreach

Arya Kukreja and KC Deane

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Preface

In the 2025–26 academic year, the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) piloted a customized chatbot for five regional partners intended to increase financial aid awareness among high school juniors and seniors as well as FAFSA completion rates among seniors. This report introduces the OtterBot regionalization pilot and amplifies early evidence of its impact on students' educational outcomes. Also included are agency recommendations for future regionalization projects. Unless otherwise stated, all data are from WSAC, and all analysis was completed by WSAC staff.

Executive Summary

The Washington Student Achievement Council's (WSAC) College Access Initiatives (CAI) division strengthens statewide college outreach and support through several initiatives, such as OtterBot, a free, human-powered, AI-informed chatbot tool that shares information about college and financial aid.

WSAC staff have long tailored OtterBot to regional contexts (for example, using financial aid completion data to target district and school support), and user testing consistently shows that students benefit from college access support grounded in their unique contexts. Because students' postsecondary plans are shaped by the people, conversations, and cultures in their communities, statewide college resources must reflect regional context.

In the 2025–26 academic year, WSAC launched an OtterBot regionalization pilot with five schools, school districts, and community-based organizations (CBO) to create customized chatbots. This pilot treats regional knowledge as an asset to help students navigate their postsecondary pathways and helps WSAC identify how to adapt statewide resources for regional contexts.

Key Findings

Throughout the pilot year, WSAC monitored outcomes related to student engagement with the chatbot, seniors' FAFSA completion rates, and regional partners' experiences with the regionalization. Researchers found that:

- Regional chatbot partner schools saw stronger FAFSA outcomes during the pilot year.
- Students in pilot regions who were enrolled in the chatbot along with their guardians had higher FAFSA completion rates than similarly enrolled students statewide.
- Active engagement declined, but students continued to use OtterBot for financial aid and college planning.

When OtterBot messaging aligns statewide resources with local ecosystems, students are more likely to see it as a relevant, trustworthy resource. The pilot showed that regionalizing the chatbot must be accompanied by outreach from trusted messengers who connect students to the tool and reinforce its relevance.

Introduction

WSAC's College Access Initiatives (CAI) division is responsible for organizing and maintaining Washington's statewide infrastructure for college and financial aid outreach and support. The team works closely with Mainstay to implement OtterBot, a free, human-powered, chatbot that provides students and families with timely, digestible information about applying to college and accessing financial aid.

Since OtterBot's launch in 2019, WSAC staff have attended to regional context in the messages they crafted; doing so is crucial because students' educational journeys are shaped by their schools, families, and communities. Even so, user testing and focus groups over the past seven years have consistently surfaced the need for a college access chatbot that is more squarely situated in students' local contexts. This feedback presents an opportunity to improve the chatbot's messaging.

Accordingly, WSAC launched an OtterBot regionalization pilot for the 2025–26 academic year. The agency established five partnerships across the state, each one located in a region with distinct cultural, social, political, and topographical attributes.[1]

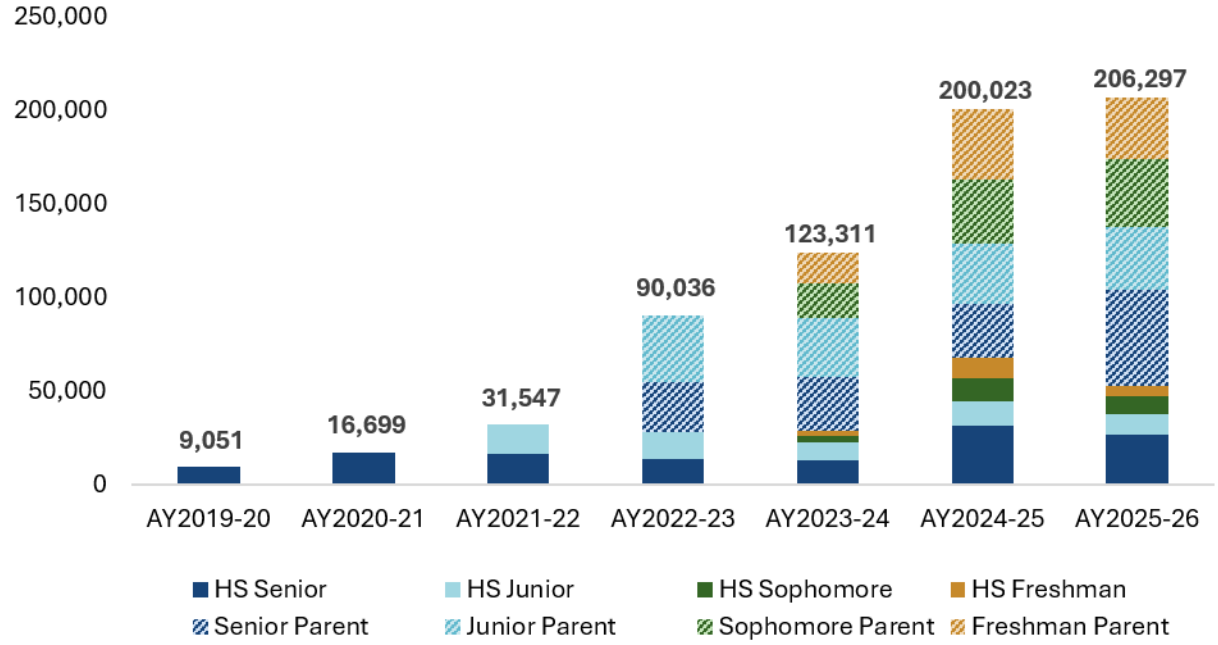
The goals of the pilot were two-fold: (1) improve postsecondary educational access in pilot regions through the targeted use of regional knowledge, and (2) build a framework that the agency can use to regionalize its outreach materials and resources.

This report introduces the OtterBot regionalization pilot and amplifies early evidence of its impact on students' educational outcomes. Also included are agency recommendations for future regionalization projects.

The OtterBot Regionalization Pilot

OtterBot, WSAC's free, human-powered chatbot, was launched as a low-cost strategy for sharing information with high school students and guardians at scale. It reaches more than 200,000 students and guardians each year, disseminating informational messages that include essay-writing tips, financial aid reminders, and advice on building college lists. Overall enrollment in the chatbot grew significantly in the 2024–25 academic year, as new legislation took effect that enabled WSAC to expand direct outreach to students and families statewide (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of Students and Guardians Enrolled in OtterBot, by Academic Year



Source: WSAC analysis of OtterBot users
Note: Counts in the above figure reflect unique users in each category.

Prior to the pilot, the agency already incorporated some regional targeting into agency outreach—for example, by using financial aid completion data to direct support to Educational Service Districts (ESD) and school districts. However, OtterBot remained primarily statewide. High school seniors interviewed as part of a research project on the potential impacts of integrating behavioral science principles into OtterBot made it clear that generic messages do not adapt to their needs.[2] Students:

- trust chatbots they recognize
- want personalized information based on local resources and supports
- want to use the chatbot to connect with trusted messengers in their community

The goal of the pilot was to showcase the partners' regional knowledge as an asset that helps in two ways: by enabling students to navigate their postsecondary pathways with confidence and by helping WSAC better understand what's required to adapt statewide resources for regional contexts. The pilot also created collaboration between WSAC and regional partners, which led to a direct line of communication about the resources and messages that would resonate with learners and families in each community.

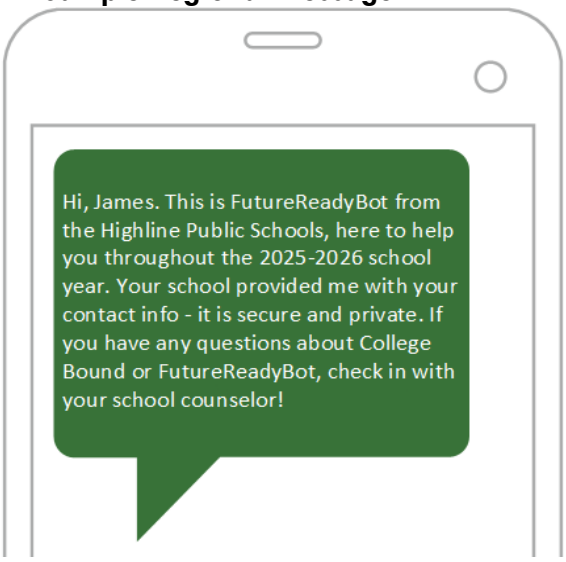
Regional Customizations

Each regional partner knows the types of resources and messages that will resonate most effectively with students and families in their communities. Even so, there are commonalities in how WSAC adapted its infrastructure to the regional context.

Specifically, WSAC maintained a consistent approach to regional branding and messaging content across all five regions:

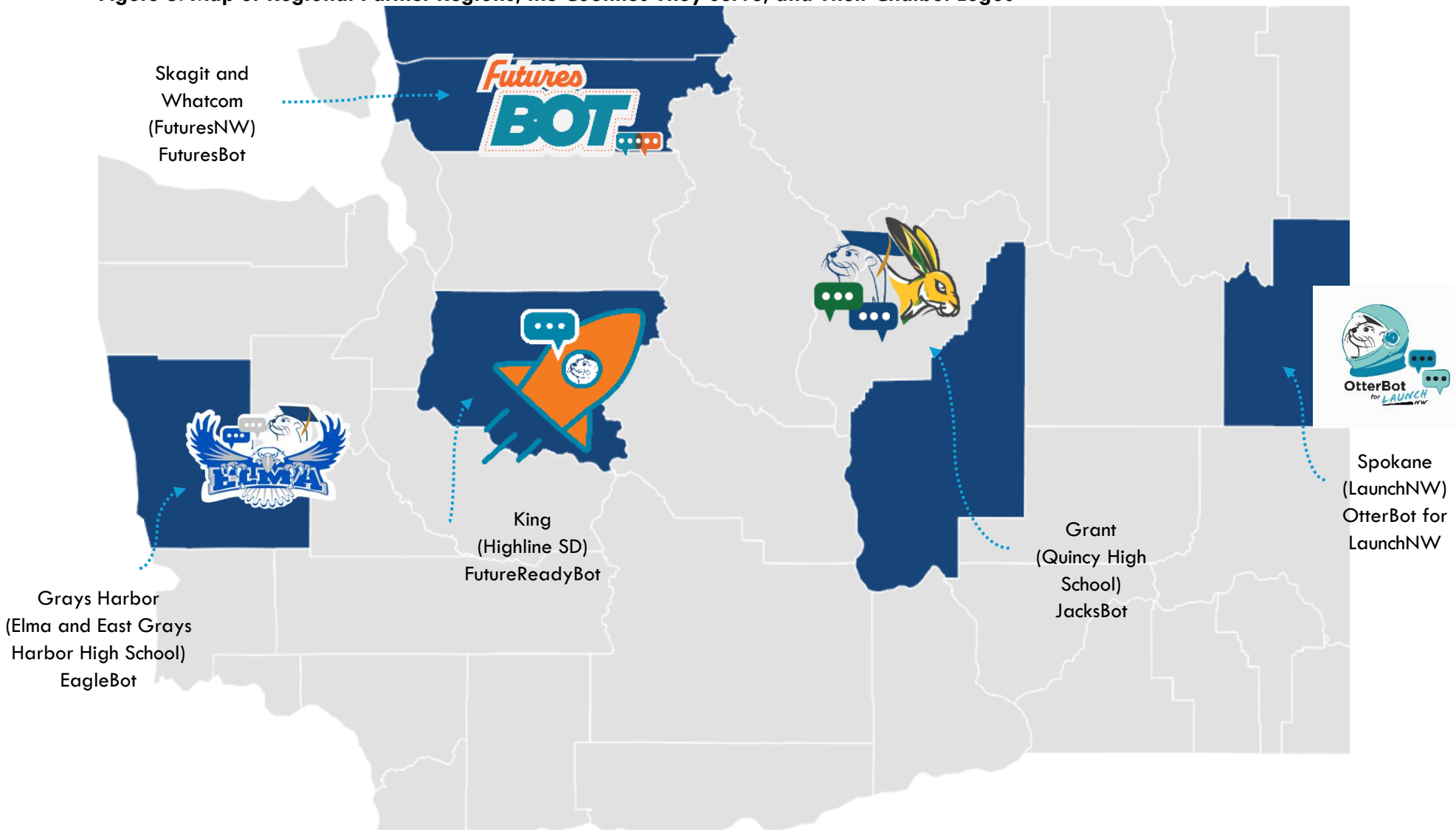
- **Adapted messaging:** Regional chatbots share local information and events with students and guardians (See Figure 2).
- **Regional branding:** OtterBot users living in pilot regions received text messages from a regionally branded version of the chatbot. Each partner selected their chatbot's name and logo (See Figure 3).
- **Local Contacts:** The regionally customized chatbot connects with human counselors in the messages sent and when the chatbot escalates questions or concerns.

Figure 2. Sample Regional Message



Source: Mainstay/OtterBot Platform.

Figure 3: Map of Regional Partner Regions, the Counties They Serve, and Their Chatbot Logos



Early Evidence of Impact

Based on the hypothesis that regional messaging would better resonate with students than standard statewide messages, WSAC monitored outcomes in three areas: engagement with the regional chatbot, FAFSA completion rates, and trusted messenger capacity. Across all three outcome areas, evidence from the pilot year demonstrates the potential impact of regionalized student and family outreach.

Hypothesized Pathways of Impact

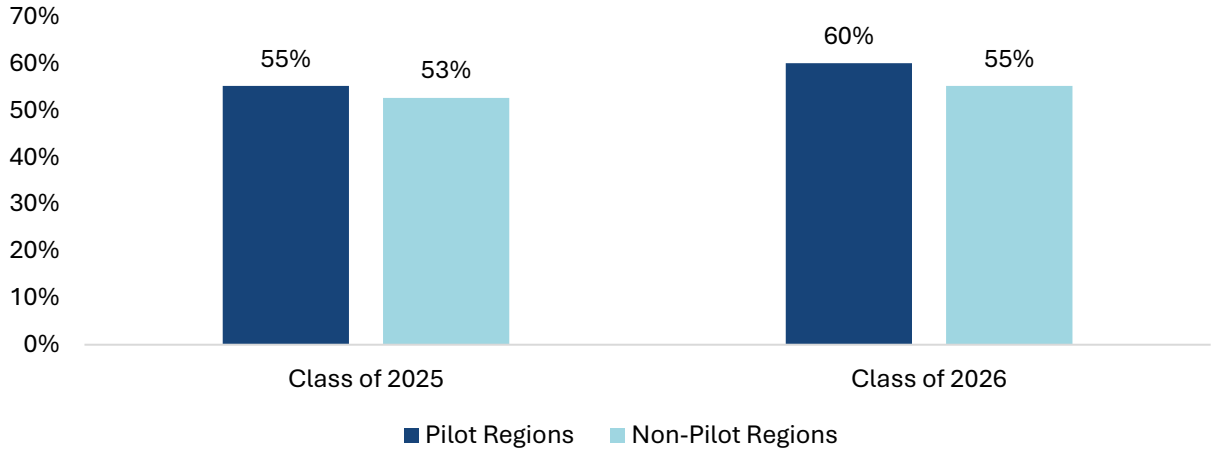
For each of the three outcome areas, the hypothesized pathway of impact is as follows:

- **Regionalized Chatbot Engagement.** Previous research found that engagement increased when messages integrated behavioral science principles.[2] Customization is theorized to increase engagement through decreased opt-out rates and increased responses to messages from the regionalized chatbot.
- **College and Financial Aid Access.** When students and their families engage with the customized chatbot, they may better understand how financial aid completion can help them reach their postsecondary goals. As a result, more student chatbot users will file an aid application and enroll in postsecondary education or job training.
- **Trusted Messenger Capacity.** As students and guardians come to rely on the customized chatbot, trusted messengers may receive fewer standard questions, allowing them to focus more on students who need individualized support.

FAFSA completion rose by 5 percentage points at pilot schools, but only 2 percentage points across non-pilot schools.

FAFSA completion rates increased overall, with pilot-region students' completion ending at a higher rate than among their peers who were not part of the pilot project (60% vs. 55%; see Figure 4). Moreover, FAFSA completion across pilot regions increased by 5 percentage points between the Class of 2025 and Class of 2026, compared to a 2 percentage point increase at non-pilot schools.

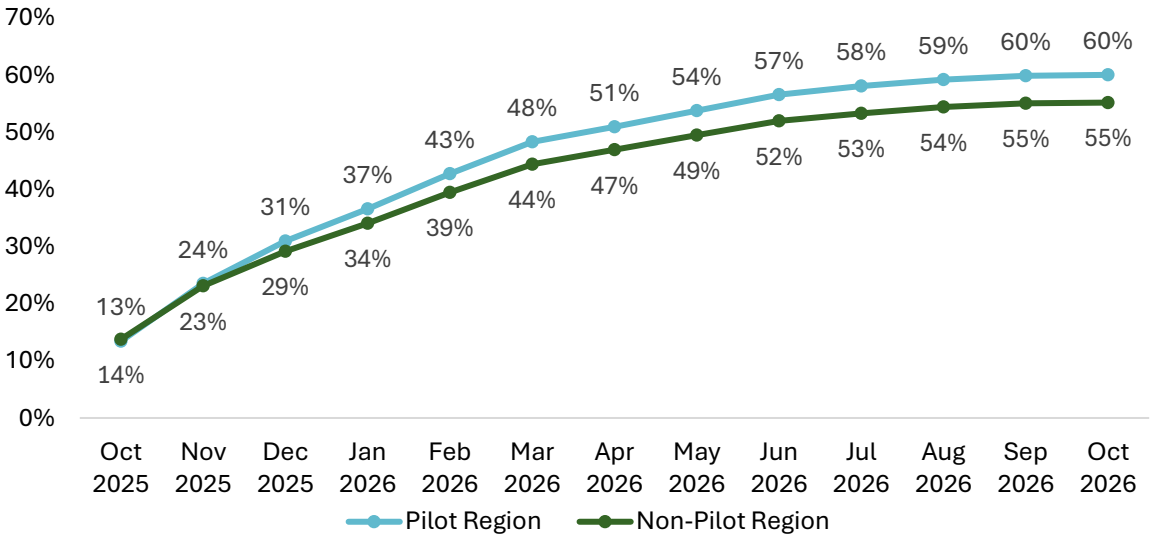
Figure 4. FAFSA Completion Rates for Class of 2025 vs. Class of 2026, by Region Type



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data.
Note: Chart reflects final completion rates for each cohort. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026.

Additionally, focusing just on the Class of 2026, the gap in completion rates widened over time compared to non-partner patterns (See Figure 5). Since February 2026, completion rates at partner schools have been at least 4 percentage points higher than non-partner schools. By May, the gap had grown to 5 percentage points higher than non-partner schools, and it held throughout the summer. The widening of this gap over the course of the pilot year aligns with the support that WSAC provided during this time, supporting partners in hosting events and promoting the chatbot as a financial aid resource.

Figure 5. Class of 2026 FAFSA Completion Rates Over Time, by Region Type



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data.
Note: Chart shows final completion rates for each month. October 2026 rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitored completion (October 5, 2026).

Active engagement declined, but students continued to use OtterBot for financial aid and college planning.

Active engagement in action: Juniors tell OtterBot they plan to file the FAFSA as seniors

Historically, fewer than 55% of high school seniors statewide complete the FAFSA before graduation. But in a spring 2026 pulse survey of high school juniors enrolled in the chatbot, over 88% of respondents in pilot regions and 78% statewide indicated that they intend to complete a financial aid application in their senior year.

What leads so many high school juniors to forego FAFSA completion during their senior year? Throughout this pilot year and through the design sprints held in the spring, WSAC learned from students and the adults they trust about challenges they face, where generalized supports aren't sufficient, and what concrete supports they need to confidently navigate financial aid and postsecondary education. Across these efforts, students consistently identified supports that would help them navigate postsecondary opportunities: meaningful engagement from parents and guardians and clear information on the range of available education and career pathways.

These insights have shaped how WSAC will implement next year's FAFSA campaign. WSAC will continue to focus on partnership support to scale 1:1 support for families, building momentum earlier in the year. WSAC will also send additional interactive messages through the chatbot to understand what prevents juniors from filing the FAFSA during their senior year.

Over the pilot year, WSAC monitored three forms of chatbot engagement: opt-out rates, active engagement rates, and types of active engagement. Across these measures, evidence is mixed on the relationship between pilot customizations and students' engagement with the bot. For example:

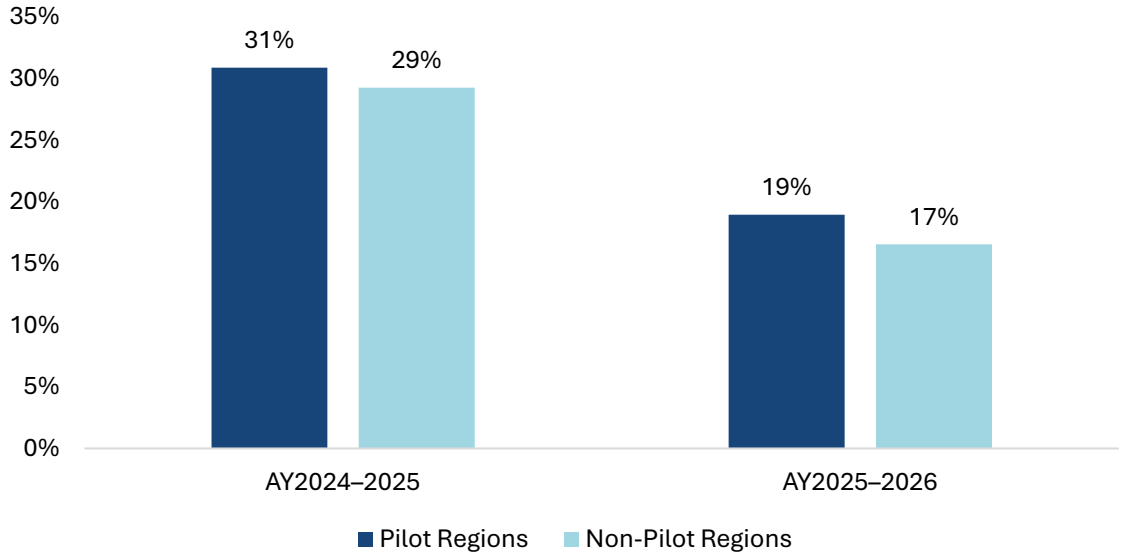
- Junior and senior active engagement rates in pilot regions ended the year two percentage points higher than engagement rates in non-pilot regions (See Figure 6). However, engagement rates almost universally declined between the 2024–25 and 2025–26 academic years.
- The number of users opting out during the 2025–26 academic year roughly doubled in pilot regions and increased by approximately 70% statewide (See Table C3).

Several factors might have contributed to these trends. In November 2025, WSAC expanded the chatbot's user base to include a large group of students who had not received the same introductory communications from counselors as earlier participants.[3]

This change could have affected both engagement and opt-out patterns, making year-over-year comparisons more difficult. A reduction in interactive campaigns could also have contributed to lower engagement. However, the available data do not establish the reasons for the decline.

The content of students' interactions provides another useful perspective. Among high school seniors who responded directly to their regional chatbot with follow-up questions or requests for information, the majority asked questions about financial aid or scholarships (See Table C4). Other common topics included getting started on postsecondary education and choosing postsecondary programs. These questions suggest that students who actively engaged with the chatbot were using it as a resource for planning their education after high school. Whether and to what extent those interactions contributed to FAFSA completion remains an open question.

Figure 6. Active Engagement Rates, by Region Type



Source: WSAC analysis of Mainstay chatbot data.
Notes: Active engagement occurs when the user sends messages back to the chatbot. Active engagement rate calculated as the total number of messages sent to the chatbot divided by the total number of active and passive users. WSAC changed its approach to measuring active engagement during the 2025-26 academic year. The rates in this graph were computed using the new approach for both years.

Several student groups saw sizable year-over-year gains in FAFSA completion. Compared to Class of 2025, the Class of 2026 at pilot schools saw notable improvements in FAFSA completion across key demographics (See Table 1). Most notably, given the pilot's goal to increase financial aid awareness and access, FRPL-eligible students' FAFSA completion rates across pilot regions increased by 6 percentage points (58% compared to 52% for the Class of 2025). Additional highlights include:

- Hispanic/Latino students had a 10-percentage-point increase in FAFSA completion at pilot schools (56% compared to 46% for Class of 2025).
- Asian students had a 9-percentage-point increase in FAFSA completion at pilot schools (77% compared to 68% for Class of 2025).
- English Language Learners (ELL) had a 7-percentage-point increase in FAFSA completion at pilot schools (44% compared to 37% for Class of 2025).
- Non-binary students had a 30-percentage-point increase in FAFSA completion at pilot schools (63% compared to 33% for Class of 2025).

Moreover, across almost all demographic groups, the FAFSA completion rate for those involved in the pilot was higher than for those who were not pilot partners.

Table 1. Year-Over-Year Final FAFSA Completion Rates, by Subgroup and Region

	Pilot Regions		Non-Pilot Regions	
	2025 Rate	2026 Rate	2025 Rate	2026 Rate
Overall FAFSA Completion Rate	55%	60%	53%	55%
By FRPL Eligibility				
Eligible	52%	58%	50%	52%
Not Eligible	59%	63%	55%	57%
By Gender				
Male	47%	52%	46%	49%
Female	65%	68%	60%	62%
Non-Binary	33%	63%	48%	54%
By Race/Ethnicity				
AI/AN	53%	47%	40%	47%
Asian	68%	77%	66%	69%
Black/African American	71%	74%	63%	63%
Hispanic/Latino (any race)	46%	56%	48%	51%
NH/OPI	41%	37%	39%	39%
Two or More	63%	65%	56%	58%
White	56%	59%	51%	54%
By ELL Status				
ELL	37%	44%	38%	41%
Non-ELL	58%	62%	54%	57%

Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data.

Note: Chart reflects final completion rates for each cohort. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026.

Students in pilot regions who were enrolled in the chatbot along with their guardians had higher FAFSA completion rates than similarly enrolled students statewide.

Listening to Students

In Spring 2026, WSAC conducted design sprints with four regional partners to surface how the subsequent year's messages could better resonate with students and parents. Across all four design sprints, students consistently named three areas where they want more support during postsecondary planning:

- **Parent support.** Students want parents involved in the decision-making process and suggest hosting junior nights to align students and families around postsecondary goals.
- **More information on the pathways they can pursue.** When a program matched their goals but remained unaffordable, students stopped looking. Students want more time with school or partner staff to help them find affordable options, opportunities to connect with professionals in fields they're interested in, and resources to explore the many ways a single career goal can be reached.
- **Messaging from the adults they and their parents already know and trust.** Students emphasized that their guardians need opportunities to talk with people they know and trust about college and financial aid. Frequently, trusted messengers are community members or faith leaders, not necessarily school staff.

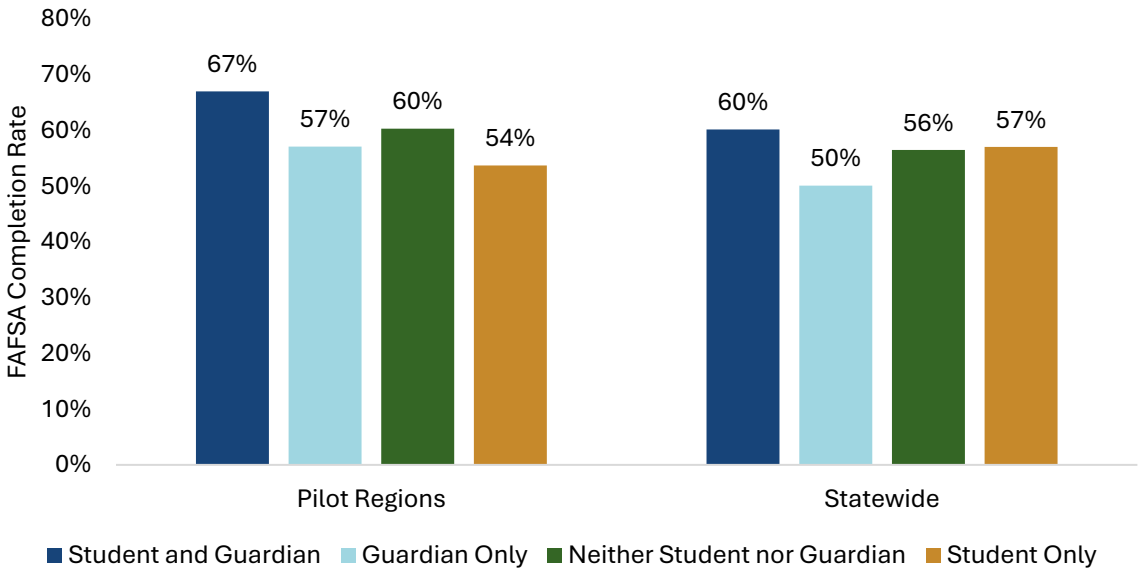
WSAC will revisit communication methods with parents and will test whether students' drafted messages impact how parents engage with their students. With clear guidance and aligned support from parents and trusted messengers, students may understand the full range of options so that they can achieve postsecondary and career goals.

Statewide and in pilot regions, FAFSA completion rates were highest among students who were enrolled in the chatbot alongside their parent or guardian (67% in pilot regions, 60% in non-pilot regions). By contrast, the group with the lowest completion rate differs between pilot and non-pilot regions. Within pilot regions, completion rates are lowest when only the student is enrolled (54%). Within non-pilot regions, rates are lowest when only a guardian is enrolled (50%).

What underlies these findings is not yet clear, but future regionalization efforts can and should explore possible explanations for the trend. The strong completion rates when both students and guardians are enrolled in the chatbot, as well as the higher completion rates for guardian-only students in pilot regions, point to an opportunity for the 2026–27

Washington Completes FAFSA campaign: Build recognition and trust with guardians alongside the regionalized messaging, so that OtterBot can support whole families as students plan for life after high school.

Figure 7: FAFSA Completion Rates by Chatbot Enrollment Type



Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA and Mainstay chatbot data.
Note: Chart reflects final completion rates for all students enrolled in pilot schools vs. non-pilot schools, categorized based on their chatbot enrollment status. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026.

Partners describe the bot as low-lift and potentially timesaving, but implementation created additional work in the pilot year.

Listening to Partners

In spring 2026, WSAC interviewed each regional partner to learn whether and how the pilot affected their capacity and region. Most notably, staff were asked about how the chatbot affected the time they spent on routine communications (for example, FAFSA reminders and event promotion), and there are two responses that stand out:

During one interview, partner staff told WSAC that they noticed a change in how students approach postsecondary planning. Rather than seeing financial aid completion as their final task, staff found that more students come to them with broader questions about different postsecondary pathways, treating financial aid as one step toward their future instead of the end goal. Staff in this region have also found that they are now working more frequently with students who need an expert to help them navigate financial aid and college access.

When asked this same question, another partner described that they used the chatbot to promote local scholarships and noticed that the applications for those scholarships increased by approximately 400 applicants. This increase came from a combination of promotion through outreach events and promotion through the regionalized chatbot.

During these interviews, WSAC learned that there are some site coordinators and school-based trusted messengers who remain skeptical of the bot, either because they are unfamiliar with it or because of challenges during its 2019 rollout. Because counselors are key trusted messengers for students, ongoing communication with partners and efforts to rebuild trust and buy-in will be essential for long-term success.

Regional partners describe the chatbot as a low-lift tool for reinforcing key messages and saw potential for it to reduce time spent on routine reminders, which could give staff more time to provide more intensive, individualized support to students with complex needs. This feedback points to a possible capacity benefit, rather than an established shift in how staff spent their time in the pilot year (Appendix B: Protocols).

Realizing the potential, however, requires additional coordination. Partners reported that the tool did not significantly increase regional partners' day-to-day workload, but the steps required to ensure its success often did. Partners needed to review generic messages, draft and review customized messaging to ensure it aligned with local context and schedules, and align chatbot outreach with existing communications. Their feedback on the experience of implementing the regional bot directly informs the recommendations outlined in the section that follows.

Five Recommendations for Implementing a Regionally Customized Chatbot

Students across the pilot regions consistently voiced that seeking support is the same as seeking connection. They raised their desire for the chatbot to connect them with real people in their communities, and they noted that their willingness to sign up for the chatbot was dependent upon whether they learned about the tool from someone they trust. For schools participating in the pilot, when counselors actively introduced and reinforced the chatbot, students were more likely to sign up for the chatbot. This pattern points to a broader lesson: Technological tools do not, independent of trusted human relationships, drive behavioral change. Instead, impact is strongest when tools are embedded within coordinated, relationship-based outreach.

Drawing on its work with regional partners, WSAC identified five steps that other organizations can follow to build and launch a tailored college and financial aid chatbot. Embedded in these recommendations are areas where WSAC's own regional outreach activities could be improved going forward. Although all of these recommendations require staff time, many of them can be integrated into existing chatbot operations. The recommendations are grounded first in ensuring that regional chatbots serve students and their families, and second in preventing regionalization from becoming more effort for regional partners.

Give partners a stable statewide messaging framework.

Before the academic year began, regional partners requested details on the standard messages that OtterBot sends to all students and guardians throughout the year. That information was not available for WSAC to share because messages have been revised annually and no stable, partner-facing messaging framework or calendar existed.

Without advance information on scheduled outreach, partners could not align their local efforts with key college and financial aid messages.

For other states interested in implementing a regionalized chatbot approach, a resource that introduces a framework of what types of statewide messages are sent and approximately when they are delivered would help all school and district-level staff—regional partners or not—coordinate local messaging with the statewide tool more effectively, reduce duplicative or poorly timed communications, and enable trusted messengers to plan their messaging so that it aligns with the state recommendations.

Front-load regional setup and promotional materials

When reflecting upon their experiences during the pilot year, several pilot partners noted the importance of receiving information and support earlier in the school year, so that they have sufficient time to review and align materials. Embedded in this reflection are two implementation challenges: timing and information.

Regional partners emphasized that earlier distribution of materials would help them ensure that they had the information needed to plan promotional activities for the regional chatbot and begin drafting their regional messages. In the pilot year, many preliminary materials were distributed to partners over the course of several months. For example, during WSAC's fall visits, WSAC learned that students were uninterested in a new tool that they did not immediately recognize. This motivated WSAC and regional partners to create a logo that combined the known statewide chatbot's identity with that of each regional partner. Once the logo was developed, WSAC delivered customized chatbot stickers and resources so that regional partners could better promote the tool and increase uptake for the Class of 2027. Unfortunately, partners did not receive these resources until spring 2026. This delay meant that many seniors were not introduced to a chatbot with a clear identity until the spring of their senior year.

In a similar way, the information shared with regional partners missed critical details, which led to additional delays in beginning outreach. For example, WSAC created QR codes for students to sign up for the chatbot, but the codes were not finalized until late fall. As a result, the direct sign-up path that WSAC created was not accessible to students until several months into the school year. Ideally, a resource such as OtterBot would be shared before the start of the academic year, or at least prior to the first message of the year, so that partners could encourage them to sign up early.

The delayed distribution of and inclusion of inaccurate information on chatbot partner materials led to a slower-than-anticipated roll-out of the regional chatbots. Awareness and enrollment momentum recovered and continued building throughout the year, but an earlier start could have captured more students earlier in their junior or senior year.

Other states hoping to incorporate a similar approach into their own regional work should consider sharing information before the start of the academic year. This would ensure that regional partners can integrate promotion into existing touchpoints and build credibility with students from the outset. A packet of materials for regional partners might include:

- promotional materials for the regional chatbot, including stickers and flyers with active QR codes to their regional bot's sign-up page

- clear partner-facing protocol for drafting regional messages, receiving state agency review, and scheduling regional messages for sending
- a standard messaging calendar that partners can use to coordinate the timing and focus of any regional messages
- short scripts, talking points, and event strategies to help counselors, teachers, and community partners feel confident introducing and promoting the chatbot

Build and continue to adapt reporting infrastructure during the pilot

Each month, WSAC sent data pages to partners to track data for chatbot engagement and promotion and to develop an understanding of how students are using the chatbot.

This resource became part of a feedback loop that allowed staff to deprioritize data points that were less important while amplifying points that resonated with regional partners. These data pages helped WSAC surface issues that would need to be resolved to monitor chatbot progress at the regional level. For example, the team shifted how engagement rates were measured to ensure that the data provided to partners was actionable. WSAC now excludes opt-out messages from its engagement measure. WSAC also learned that for some partners, guardian engagement data was helpful for their local outreach, so WSAC added that into their monthly reporting as well.

While these improvements were occurring, WSAC made two other improvements to its internal reporting infrastructure with outcomes-monitoring in mind: (1) Automate the process of retrieving chatbot engagement data for parents or guardians and (2) develop a way to consistently identify whether a student is in the chatbot and whether they have at least one parent or guardian enrolled in the chatbot as well.

Through these partner-facing and internal reporting changes, WSAC staff were also able to provide feedback to Mainstay, the chatbot vendor, on reporting improvements that would enable partners like WSAC to more effectively monitor chatbot engagement over time.

State agencies committed to improving regional outreach would benefit from taking a similar approach: Identify the outcomes early, then, while formal reporting is being developed, identify short-term data points to share with regional partners. Staff benefit from understanding in real time the data points that partners value and which data points are most difficult to replicate. Their learning then informs how outcomes are monitored, by whom, and on what cadence.

Use trusted messengers to introduce the chatbot

WSAC worked with partners to raise chatbot awareness at local outreach events throughout the pilot year. Partners also received chatbot stickers and flexible grant funding

to support their desired incentives, helping them make events more responsive to their students' needs.

Across six documented events and outreach periods throughout the 2025–26 academic year, 270 junior and senior students registered for the chatbot. The largest increase occurred during Highline's FutureU event, when 144 juniors and seniors signed up in a single day in April.[4] Other increases aligned with Elma's junior event (43 sign-ups), two FuturesNW spring events (Learning with Leaders and WSAC design sprint at Options High School; 33 sign-ups total), WSAC's visit to LaunchNW in Fall 2025 (16 sign-ups), and Quincy High School's Spring design sprint visit (34 sign-ups).[5]

These patterns suggest that trusted messengers—such as school staff, regional partners, and event leaders—play an important role in connecting students to the chatbot and should be included in states' efforts to regionalize existing tools. Events and site visits gave students an opportunity to hear about the tool from people they know, understand how it could support them, and sign up while support was readily available.

Adjust messaging when local conditions change

Throughout the pilot year, WSAC continued to adapt the tool to address community needs. For example, during the 2025–26 academic year, there were several natural disasters that impacted several of our regional partners. In December 2025, flooding across Washington state impacted several counties served by regional partners, including King, Skagit, and Whatcom counties. Staff in these regions were over capacity as they supported students in the area.[6] Similarly, in summer 2026, there were significant fires in Spokane County, forcing thousands of families and students to evacuate their homes.[7] In such extreme circumstances, communities are not able to consider college access; they need to take care of their families, friends, and others.

Typical college messaging during such times is not what communities need. WSAC avoided overwhelming students with information that might cause additional stress. In most cases, and in consultation with regional partners, messaging was delayed or paused so that regional partners and students alike could focus on supporting their communities.

Likewise, other states hoping to incorporate regionalized messaging must be in close communication with partners to understand when to be flexible with messaging so that students feel like they have the support they need in any given situation.

Conclusion

The lessons from this work contribute to a more connected, trusted support system that helps advance the state's efforts to ensure that 70% of Washingtonians aged 25–44 earn a

postsecondary credential or degree. Looking ahead, these lessons should guide future OtterBot efforts, emphasizing regional alignment, early and coordinated promotion, and strategies that make it easier for trusted adults to introduce and reinforce the tool as part of a broader, trust-centered support system for students and families.

Appendix A: The Five Regional Partners

Elma High School

Elma High School, in Grays Harbor County, is a tight-knit, rural community. Staff at Elma work closely with Grays Harbor College, the nearest community and technical college (CTC). Together, they align education pathways with industry demand to support residents' economic mobility. The main industries available in Elma are education, timber, manufacturing, horticulture, energy, and healthcare.

Elma High School primarily serves White students, and Latino students are the largest minority. In the Class of 2025, 59% of seniors at Elma High School completed the FAFSA, and among the Class of 2023, 47% of high school seniors enrolled in college in the fall after high school graduation.

Many families in Elma's Latino community are from a region in Mexico that speaks Trique as its native language. That these residents can preserve their native language creates cultural connections that benefit students and families alike. At the same time, school staff are still learning how to communicate with families in their native language.

Elma staff shared that ICE presence nearby is causing fear among students due to the potential impacts on their friends, families, and community and, in turn, is undermining their sense of safety at school.

More broadly, Elma staff report that informal trusted community messengers question the value of "non-traditional" pathways, such as apprenticeship programs or two- to four-year transfer. The high school counters these narratives with actionable information that helps students navigate their own decision-making. For example, in response to a desire for actionable career-connected learning, the school now offers a mix of traditional academics and the opportunity to earn credits through applied projects. In a similar way, students can take manufacturing classes to earn algebra credit or a technical writing course to earn English credit.

A central goal of WSAC's partnership with Elma was to demonstrate OtterBot's value-add for students and counselors. Partners shared that students, administrators, counselors, and families are overwhelmed with the sheer number of resources available. Against this backdrop, OtterBot is one more resource piled on top. Using a locally branded, regionalized version of OtterBot to answer questions and connect students with trusted local messengers gave Elma a way to contribute to a broader cultural shift around education, which may help build a community narrative that education is a collective priority by spreading accurate information and reinforcing it throughout the community.

Design Sprint

Students at the Elma High School design sprint focused their discussions on two major themes: the role of family and the need for clearer guidance on postsecondary pathways. These insights shaped the questions students prioritized:

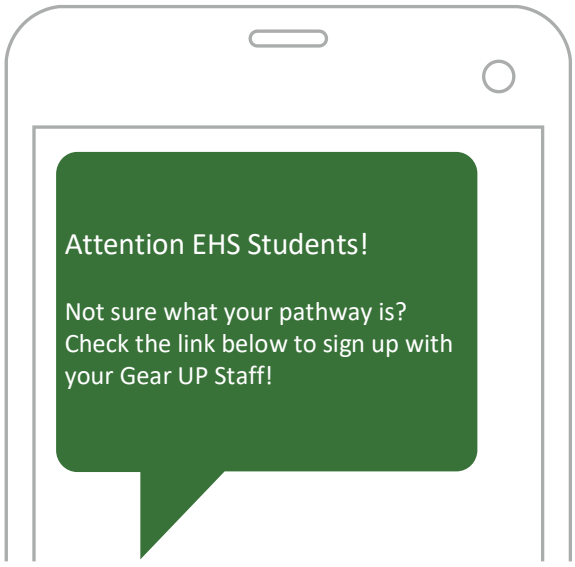
- How might we help parents better support their children's postsecondary future?
- How might we help students understand their options and explore different pathways?

Student messages emphasized that support is most helpful when it feels both clear and relatable. Students highlighted the value of trusted school staff, familiar faces, and local context in building trust and encouraging engagement with tools like EagleBot (the regionalized version of OtterBot). Staff reflections pointed to ways of building that relatability into future interventions. Counselors noticed that the personas WSAC made—descriptions of student characters who may have experiences that students in the design sprint could relate to—helped students open up about their own experiences. Elma staff want to use those personas more in their counseling and student support. They also suggested that high schoolers could draft question prompts to share with parents, so that students and parents can become jointly engaged in the planning process.

Figure A1: Student Message Recommendation to Send to Parents

Source: WSAC Design Sprint held at Elma High School in Spring 2026.

Figure A2: Student Message Recommendation to Send to Future Juniors and Seniors



Source: WSAC Design Sprint held at Elma High School in Spring 2026.

FuturesNW

FuturesNW, which operates in northwestern Washington, bridges educational opportunity gaps for local students by providing hands-on mentorship, college preparation, and career exploration services that encourage exploratory learning. FuturesNW has deep connections with Whatcom and Skagit county high schools, which include one tribal community/school, five alternative schools and dozens of public schools. The region is home to three CTCs, one tribal college, and a university; major workforce industries in the region include healthcare, construction, and advanced manufacturing.

Schools receiving regional support from FuturesNW have students who qualify for the College Bound Scholarship; are underrepresented in higher education; have disabilities; are first generation; come from FRPL-eligible or low-income families; experience homelessness; and are predominantly from White, Latino, and tribal communities. FAFSA completion rates across partner high schools was 35% for the Class of 2025, whereas direct-to-college enrollment rates range from a low of 31% to a high of 54% for Class of 2023.

College access staff at the local high schools and the FuturesNW are mission-aligned in their commitment to advancing educational opportunities for students and their families. Partner organizations work in tandem to amplify shared messages among students and families in the region. Even so, staff are stretched thin because of factors beyond their control. Recent federal U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids in the region have made Latino and migrant students fearful; as a result, postsecondary planning is not their top priority. Counselors have shown unwavering commitment as they support students navigating trauma, but the persistent demand has pushed them beyond their capacity. Moreover, staff shared that education narratives in the community leave some students doubting whether they can afford postsecondary education and, if they enrolled, whether they could succeed.

FuturesNW is particularly focused on serving historically marginalized students and hoped that the OtterBot regionalization effort would create opportunities to leverage storytelling and translation services as an innovative approach to sharing educational success stories. By offering an alternative narrative about who belongs in educational spaces, as well as actionable tools that help learners access and afford educational opportunities, FuturesNW hoped to offer students a viable trajectory that they can follow to achieve college and career success.

FuturesNW recently lost a significant portion of its funding, forcing the organization to scale down and directly impacting its Financial Aid Completion Support and QuickStart to College programs. The partner actively uses OtterBot as a capacity builder to provide additional financial aid support. WSAC's regionalization pilot will provide additional support by offering supplemental in-person financial aid support and coordinating events, including printed materials and translations.

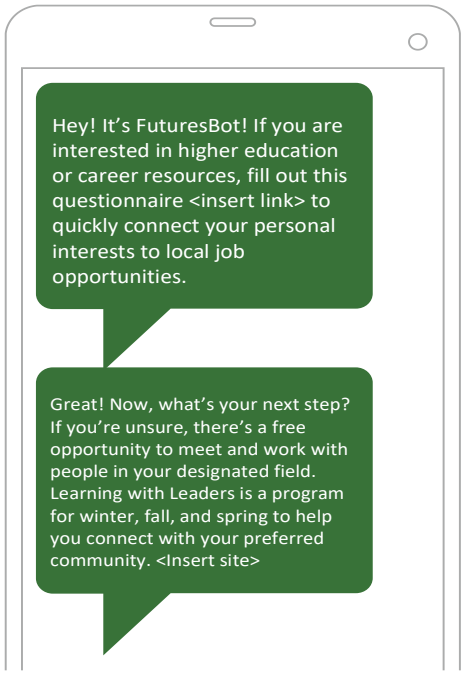
Design Sprint

Students at the FuturesNW design sprint—hosted by Options High School—identified two major challenges shaping their postsecondary planning: pressure from family, peers, and themselves, and a general lack of direction. These led students to focus on two key questions:

- How might we better support conversations between students, families, and counselors around family pressure?
- How might we connect students with community members working in their fields of interest?

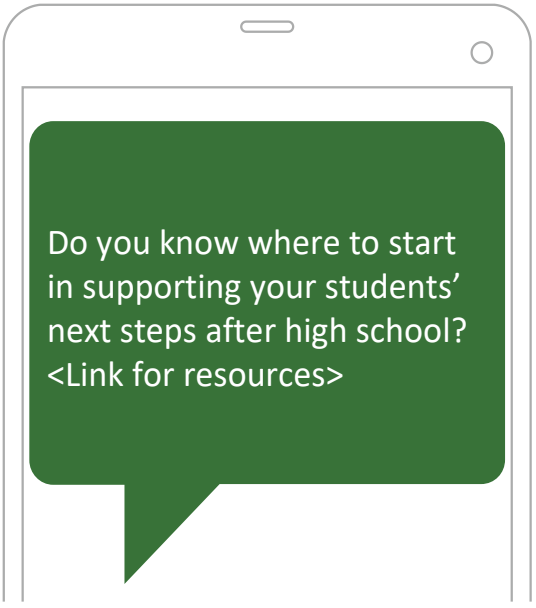
In response, students developed messages that emphasized the importance of having parents who are present, supportive, and actively engaged in the college process, as well as the value of connecting with professionals to better understand potential career paths. They also highlighted a broader need for clearer, more coordinated systems to navigate postsecondary pathways. They called for credible career interest assessments, a centralized hub for resources and support from partners, and more opportunities to engage with community members through efforts like FuturesNW's Learning with Leaders events.

Figure A3: Student Message Recommendation to Send to Future Junior and Senior Students



Source: WSAC Design Sprint held at Options High School in Spring 2026.

Figure A4: Student Message Recommendation to Send to Parents



Source: WSAC Design Sprint held at Options High School in Spring 2026.

Highline Public Schools

Situated between two of Washington's most populated cities—Seattle and Tacoma—Highline Public Schools is a large, diverse district where many students aspire to careers in healthcare, human services, construction, and other growing industries. Highline Public Schools supports students in exploring a range of postsecondary pathways. Students pursue postsecondary education at both community and technical colleges and public four-year institutions, with Highline College and the University of Washington representing the most common destinations in each sector.

The district serves a racially diverse student population: 41% identify as Latino, 16% as Asian, and 14% as Black/African American. FAFSA completion rates vary widely across schools, ranging from 14% to 84% for the Class of 2025, and direct to college enrollment rates range from 18% to 87% for the Class of 2023.

Staff have identified two major challenges in supporting students with post–high school planning. First, there is a need to shift High School and Beyond Planning from a compliance-focused task to a meaningful, student-centered process that helps young people identify career interests and choose postsecondary pathways aligned to their skills and values. Second, Black, Indigenous, Latino, Native, and Pacific Islander male students enroll in postsecondary programs at lower rates than their peers—a gap Highline is committed to closing. By rebuilding trust and strengthening culturally responsive practices, the district aims to create supports and resources that help more underrepresented students not only pursue but complete a postsecondary credential.

In addition, the district is working to reduce perceived barriers to college affordability by proactively engaging College Bound families and partnering with community organizations to bring financial aid support directly into community spaces, rather than expecting students to seek it out. School-based staff also meet with each senior multiple times a year to assist them with future planning.

By using OtterBot to deliver culturally responsive college-planning messages, Highline hopes to provide clear, accessible guidance to students and families. The district anticipates that more students will engage with the resources available to them and feel empowered to plan for the future they choose—aligning with the goals of Highline's strategic plan.

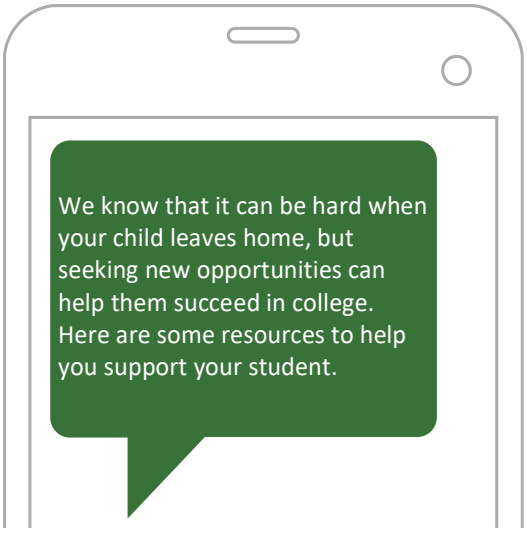
Design Sprint

Two key challenges surfaced in the Highline Public Schools design sprint, hosted at Evergreen High School: pressure from parents and academic struggles. Some students described a particular kind of pressure from families to "figure it out" on their own, even when the information and systems around them felt unclear or inaccessible. These themes led students to ask two main questions:

- How might we share with students and parents the benefits of college?
- How might we help parents celebrate students' capabilities?

In response to these questions, students grappled with how to write a message that would frame their uncertainty as a natural part of navigating a complex system. As part of their discussions, they pointed out that the information their families rely on, such as advice from podcasts or faith leaders, does not always align with student goals or provide concrete next steps. Together, these pressures point to a broader narrative that some students surfaced: that access to opportunities can sometimes feel dependent on already knowing how to succeed.

Figure A5: Student Message Recommendation to Send to Parents



Source: WSAC Design Sprint held at Evergreen High School in Spring 2026.

LaunchNW

LaunchNW is a regional, collaborative initiative of the Innovia Foundation. The organization, which is focused on building cradle-to-career pathways for students in Eastern Washington, is piloting regionalization in 13 high schools within Spokane County. Students who remain local for postsecondary enrollment can choose among four local universities, two community and technical colleges, and a range of trades and apprenticeship programs. As students enter the workforce, they may find employment in industries such as healthcare, manufacturing, banking, and agriculture.

The schools included in LaunchNW's regionalization outreach serve a population of primarily White students, with Latino students being the largest minority. FAFSA completion rates at high schools in the region range from 41% to 67% for Class of 2025, whereas direct-to-college enrollment rates across the region's high schools range from a low of 37% to a high of 64% for Class of 2023.

This region has recently had an influx of students from non-English speaking households. LaunchNW often uses translation resources to ensure that these students and families can access college materials without depending on the student to translate.

The partnership serves high schools in both rural and urban areas, each with a distinct educational culture. Partners describe the limited geographic access of postsecondary institutions among rural communities, contrasting this with the relative proximity between nearby postsecondary institutions and high schools in more densely populated regions. Regardless of the population density, local narratives about education reveal increased distrust of education and government, alongside a simultaneous skepticism that local businesses will hire Spokane residents. LaunchNW is intentionally shifting its messaging and outreach strategies to counter distrust and in the potential benefits of pursuing additional education and training after high school.

Quincy High School

Quincy High School is a public high school in a rural, agriculture-based region in central Washington. For students pursuing a postsecondary education, there is a strong emphasis on vocational training connected to the prominence of agricultural and data work in the region. The school also works closely with Big Bend Community College and Central Washington University, the two nearest public colleges and universities, to support students in these careers.

Students at Quincy High School are primarily Latino. Many Quincy students are also multilingual, speaking both English and Spanish at home. Last year, 49% of the Class of 2025 at Quincy High School completed the FAFSA and 43% of the Class of 2023 enrolled in college in the fall directly after high school graduation.

Counselors at Quincy High School witness first-hand the powerful influence of family ties on community members' behaviors and actions, including learners' postsecondary choices. Students' familial relationships are a remarkable strength when it comes to building and maintaining close community relationships, but they can become an obstacle when students' educational aspirations differ from their parents' aspirations for them. Quincy students know that college is important, but there is a broader distrust of postsecondary education systems in the community, and many families face financial and cultural barriers that make it hard for students to pursue postsecondary education. Some students choose not to go to college in order to avoid adding to financial strain at home. Those who do pursue postsecondary education become high school alumni who offer active and ongoing support for current Quincy students navigating the same decision.

Recognized at the state level for closing achievement gaps, Quincy High School is a model of equity-focused education; it continues to innovate in how it supports its students' long-term goals. The high school offers career-connected programs, dual credit options, and healthcare and data center certification programs that align with the local industries.

This close-knit community works together to support students. Club advisors and coaches serve as trusted messengers for whole families. Counselors, parents and students at Quincy High School are goal-aligned and eager to work together to help students tackle barriers to postsecondary education. Everyone in the community wants to celebrate students' educational accomplishments.

WSAC aimed to tailor OtterBot messaging to reflect the strong, collaborative values present in the region to ensure that statewide infrastructure works in tandem with existing community narratives. This approach was meant to help students feel supported by their community, high school, and state as they pursued their desired postsecondary pathway.

Design Sprint

Students at the Quincy High School design sprint surfaced two core barriers: financial struggles or finding scholarships and support from school and home. These barriers motivated two key questions:

- How might we prepare students to manage how unpredictable it is to know what they will get from scholarships?
- How might we find places and people to support and connect with people who relate and have similar interests to us?

In response, students drafted messages that indicated a need for clear, trustworthy guidance to find scholarships that fit their interests and make the process feel manageable (Figure A7). Students also highlighted the value of camaraderie, belonging, and connection, especially opportunities to hear from peers and near-peers who share similar interests and experience (Figure A6).

Figure A6: Student Message Recommendation to Send to Junior and Senior Students

Source: WSAC Design Sprint held at Quincy High School in Spring 2026.

Figure A7: Student Message Recommendation to Send to Junior and Senior Students

Source: WSAC Design Sprint held at Quincy High School in Spring 2026.

Appendix B: Pilot Planning and Implementation Activities

Prior to the start of the 2025–26 academic year, WSAC holistically prepared for pilot implementation in three key ways. The agency:

Developed a student journey map to identify key decision points, questions, and support needs students may experience as they move toward postsecondary education. It helps identify student needs and guides messaging to better support them. Although this journey map supports outreach beyond the regional chatbots, agency staff leveraged the timing of the pilot as an opportunity to intentionally review and improve existing outreach plans.
Updated Mainstay's message-delivery platform to accommodate the regionalization. In practice, steps included creating partner-specific audiences, integrating partner branding into standard messages, and adding new resources to the bot's knowledge base. These updates ensured that students received messages from the appropriate regional partner and that engagement could be recorded consistently across the statewide initiative. (See the Mainstay Platform Updates on the following page.)
Interviewed regional partner organizations to identify shared priorities, regional differences, and the programs that should receive greater emphasis in chatbot outreach. Questions were designed to help WSAC staff understand the conditions shaping students' college and financial-aid journeys in each community. (See the Pre-Pilot Regional Learning protocol on pg. 28.)

Throughout the academic year, WSAC built out its reporting infrastructure to enable staff to more easily observe the relationship between chatbot enrollment and FAFSA completion. Most notably, a new impact report allows agency staff to observe school-level FAFSA completion by chatbot enrollment type: student only, student and guardian only or no contact with the chatbot.

Toward the end of the year, WSAC directly engaged students and regional partners to learn how future regional outreach efforts could be improved.

- Conducted student design sprints to learn whether students recognized and used their region's customized chatbot, whether they trusted it, and how it could better support them—particularly juniors preparing for their senior year. (See Design Sprint Protocol on pgs. 31-32).
- Conducted interviews with trusted messengers and other adults to understand how the pilot affected their capacity to support students and where chatbot outreach complemented existing advising relationships. (See the Post-Pilot Reflection protocol on pg. 30.)

- Fielded a statewide survey of juniors and seniors to assess what students understand about financial aid and identify the information and support that would help them complete next steps. (See OtterBot Pulse Survey Instrument on pg. 32.)

Mainstay Platform Updates

There were several platform changes that WSAC and Mainstay updated so that the regionalized chatbots could send relevant messages to each partner service region (See Table B1).

Table B1: Mainstay and WSAC platform updates for regionalization

Platform Update	What it enabled
Hello Page or Sign-up page development	Each regional chatbot has its own customized sign-up or Hello Page with a unique URL. This ensures that students and parents sign up for their region's chatbot and receive only the messages for their area.
Organizational Attributes	Each regional partner has their own updated characteristics, or Organizational Attributes, which are key details such as dates, URLs, and school/partner names. These make it easy for the chatbot to find information.
Knowledge Base	The Knowledge Base is the central location for all program details, student resources, and scholarship information. WSAC updates the Knowledge Base with partner-specific content to ensure the chatbot delivers region-aligned guidance to students.
Custom Contact Fields	Contact Fields are created when students and parents sign up for the chatbot. These fields include details such as names, phone numbers, schools, and regional partners, which allow the system to group students and parents into Audiences that deliver specific messaging.
Audience	An Audience is a filter that describes a group of contact records. These dynamic lists update automatically based on the criteria applied. WSAC manages multiple audiences for each regional partner based on grade-level, school, interests, and chatbot history.

Interview Protocol: Pre-Pilot Regional Learning

WSAC developed a learning protocol to better understand the conditions shaping students' education and workforce pathways in each region. The protocol centered regional partners' firsthand knowledge and identified both shared opportunities and locally specific needs.

In late summer 2025, the WSAC team met individually with each partner to learn about their region's assets, relationships, and priorities. Conversations explored several areas, including the history of the region and existing college access initiatives operating in the area. The complete list of interview questions is included below.

Regional overview

- What makes your high school community unique?
- What is something about your region that should get more attention or acknowledgement?
- Are there any schools in your region where the student experience stands out as being particularly unique or different?

Local partnerships and community networks

- Are there any local partners that you already partner with (CBO, mentors) to support students with engaging in postsecondary education?
- Probe: How did you develop and how do you maintain these relationships?
- How does your region collaborate with neighboring regions both in the day-to-day and in advancing postsecondary education?

Social and cultural context

- What is the demographic makeup of the students, and are there certain populations that need extra support? What are the key values and traditions that shape local perceptions of postsecondary education?
- Are there any deeply rooted relationships with community members and organizations in your region that influence who you connect students with?
    - Probe: Are there mentorship programs that connect students with cultural leaders or role models who reflect the values/traditions of the community (both formal and informal connections)?
- Who are the local trusted messengers to students/families in your region?

Education and workforce-development opportunities

- What are the most common industries in your region?
    - Probe: How well do the current local educational programs align with local labor market needs?
- Are there cultural considerations we should be aware of when supporting students with financial aid or college planning?
    - Probe: Have there been any recent changes in attitude towards postsecondary education in your region? Why?
- How do you know students are engaging with your existing methods/messaging/outreach efforts?
    - Probe: What other outreach do you do?

If you had unlimited access to OtterBot, what would you want this platform to do?

- Probe: What support do counselors in your area need?

Challenges and closing

What are some things we didn't touch on that you'd like to highlight?

- What would make your region an even better place to live?

Interview Protocol: Post-Pilot Reflection

In spring 2026, WSAC interviewed trusted messengers to better understand whether and how the chatbot impacted the capacity of the pilot's regional partners, as well as how they experienced the implementation of the regionalized chatbot in their community. These virtual interviews lasted an hour and were facilitated by a member of WSAC's Research team.

Value of a regionalized chatbot

- How are you currently using the regionalized chatbot in your work with students?
- How, if at all, has the chatbot supported your students' access to information or resources?
- Can you share an example of a time when the chatbot was particularly helpful—or not helpful—for a student? Have you noticed any differences in engagement from students who don't typically attend events? If so, what have you observed?
- How do students talk about the chatbot when it comes up in conversations?

Chatbot Implementation Process

- How did the level of effort change over time?
- Did it cause more challenges throughout the year?
- What parts of the implementation of the chatbot were the most challenging?
- What about the pilot year went as you expected? Where was the work different from your expectations?

Capacity

- How, if at all, has the chatbot affected the time you spend on routine communications (for example, FAFSA reminders, event promotion)?
- Have any aspects of using the chatbot increased your workload? If so, in what ways?
- How manageable is the process of reviewing chatbot messages?
- Has the chatbot changed how you prioritize your time or the types of support you provide to students?
- What, if anything, have you been able to communicate with or do for students that is the result of the chatbot?

Future Regionalization Work

What would make the chatbot easier to maintain in your region long term?

- What features, supports, or changes would improve your experience using the chatbot?
- What has been the most valuable aspect of using the chatbot for you or your students?

Design Sprint Protocol: Student Messaging Prototypes

The design sprints were a four-phase, time-constrained process structured to turn an idea into a product, or in this case, a message for the chatbot. These phases led participants through a process of building empathy, brainstorming barriers, and proposing messages that could respond to those barriers (see Table B2). Each design sprint, which lasted one to two hours, aimed to identify strategies to strengthen trust in the chatbot and improve its ability to meet students' needs. Counselors, teachers, and staff at each school were invited to explore with their students how the regionally customized chatbot operates in their region and what would make it more relatable.

Most design sprints were held in a classroom or college and career room at a partner school. At each table, the facilitators set out regional chatbot stickers, scrap papers, wireframes for drafting messages, sticky notes, and markers. Students worked through a structured process in pairs and small groups to surface patterns and generate solutions.

Design sprints were held in four of the five regional partner regions in Washington: Bellingham, White Center, Elma, and Quincy. Breakfast snacks and afternoon refreshments from a local bakery or restaurant were provided at each design sprint to keep participants enthusiastic about their work throughout the session.

Table B2. Four Phases of the OtterBot Design Sprints

Phase	Description
Empathy Building	Built empathy by playing hot seat, where students took on their assigned persona and asked each other questions as if they were pretending to be the persona. Discussed the barriers each of their personas faced and highlighted two key challenges across all personas at their table.
Ideation	Once the barriers were narrowed down to address the barriers that all the personas at their table face, they used these barriers to think identify actions that would help address the key challenges that they and their personas faced, a re-phrased these actions in terms of “how might we…” questions. Voted on which “how might we” question felt the most relatable and relevant to the students themselves and the personas they were supporting.
Prototyping	To answer these two questions, students discussed and drafted what message they could convey that would help answer and resolve their identified questions. In some groups, messages targeted students and in

	other groups, students found it most beneficial to send messages to parents. For some students, it was more important to draft messages to parents rather than to students, as their parents lack knowledge about postsecondary education, don't speak English, and don't know how to engage with counselors. Other students were parenting students who are not legally required to depend on their parents, but they wanted their parents to know that this doesn't mean they don't need them.
Recommendations	After many of the design sprints, WSAC staff spent time with partner staff and students to informally hear about other ways they could see the regionalized chatbot incorporated into their existing communication methods. Students and staff recommended that students have other classmates be "ambassadors" and promote the tool and host events to inform parents about the tool and how it can support their students.

OtterBot Pulse Survey Instrument

In spring 2026, WSAC administered a pulse survey to junior and senior students to gauge students' awareness of financial aid, perceptions of its value, anticipated likelihood of applying and challenges they face when completing an application. The survey was intended to identify where students need clearer information or assistance.

The survey was sent to all juniors and seniors and had one juniors-only question on their likelihood of applying for financial aid the following year (See Table B3).

Table B3. OtterBot Pulse Survey Questions

Survey Question	Audience	Options
How important is it for high school seniors to apply for financial aid?	Juniors and Seniors	• Important • Somewhat important • Not at all important • I'm not sure what financial aid options are available
What do you think is the most important thing financial aid helps students do?	Juniors and Seniors	• Pay for college or training programs • Qualify for grants or scholarships • Qualify for loans • Understand how much college will cost • I'm not sure
How likely do you think you are to apply for financial aid next year?	Juniors only	• Likely • Somewhat likely • Unlikely
Which of the following do you think is the hardest part of applying for financial aid?	Juniors and Seniors	• Not enough clear information about how it works • Limited access to help or support • It seems too complicated

	• Uncertainty about eligibility • Family barriers • Nothing. It feels important and doable • Other - Write In: _____

Appendix C: Supplemental Data Tables

Table C1: Descriptive Statistics for 12th Grade Students in Pilot Regions

	Elma and East Grays Harbor HS	FuturesNW	Highline Public Schools	LaunchNW	Quincy HS	Aggregate
Total 12th Grade Students (Count)	140	629	1,748	3,106	220	5,843
By FRPL Eligibility						
Eligible	42%	52%	62%	43%	74%	51%
Not Eligible	58%	48%	38%	57%	26%	49%
By Gender						
Male	51%	50%	53%	52%	49%	52%
Female	49%	49%	46%	48%	51%	48%
Non-Binary	0%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%
By Race/Ethnicity						
AI/AN	2%	6%	1%	1%	0%	1%
Asian	1%	2%	16%	2%	0%	6%
Black/African American	0%	2%	14%	3%	0%	6%
Hispanic/Latino (any race)	24%	29%	41%	10%	89%	25%
NH/OPI	0%	0%	3%	2%	0%	2%
Two or More	5%	3%	7%	8%	0%	7%
White	69%	59%	17%	75%	10%	53%
By ELL Status						
ELL	6%	8%	31%	5%	29%	14%
Non-ELL	94%	92%	69%	95%	71%	86%

Source: OSPI Report Card Enrollment 2025–26 Academic Year

Note: Enrollment counts capture overall 12th grade enrollment status, regardless of expected graduation year.

Table C2: Pct. of Expected HS Seniors within Each Pilot Region that are Chatbot Users

	Count of Expected HS Seniors	Student Only (%)	Guardian Only (%)	S + G (%)	Neither S nor G (%)
All Partners	5,198	5%	21%	13%	61%
Elma and East Grays Harbor HS	120	*	48%	*	45%
FuturesNW	491	7%	21%	10%	62%
Highline Public Schools	1,495	7%	21%	26%	46%
LaunchNW	2,884	4%	18%	7%	72%
Quincy High School	208	*	52%	*	42%
Statewide (Seniors)	86,638	4%	22%	10%	65%

Source: WSAC Internal Report, data as of June 2026.

Note: Table captures OtterBot enrollment status as of June 2026, prior to the end of students' senior year of high school. Count of expected high school seniors reflects the total number of 12th grade students who were expected to graduate during the 2025 - 2026 academic year, as of June 2026. Due to district-level enrollment adjustments, counts of expected high school graduates shift throughout the academic year. A student may have more than one guardian enrolled in the bot. * indicates suppression due to small cell size or for cross-group suppression.

Table C3: Junior and Senior Chatbot Engagement Data

	Count of Opt-outs		Active Engagement Rates	
	2024–25 AY	2025–26 AY	2024–25 AY	2025–26 AY
All Partners	99	213	31%	19%
Elma and East Grays Harbor HS	*	*	8%	15%
FuturesNW	*	*	35%	24%
Highline Public Schools	23	54	27%	17%
LaunchNW	56	107	37%	20%
Quincy High School	*	*	47%	29%
Statewide (Jrs/Srs)	1,520	2,563	29%	17%

Source: WSAC analysis of Mainstay data as of 6/29/26.

Note: * indicates suppression due to small cell size or for cross-group suppression.

Table C4: Percent of Text Messages Sent to the Chatbot in Key Knowledge Areas (Pilot Regions vs. Statewide)

	Seniors (Class of 2026)		Juniors (Class of 2027)	
	Partner	Statewide	Partner	Statewide
Academics	NA	NA	9%	NA
Financial Aid and Scholarships	63%	60%	41%	36%
Getting Started on Postsecondary Education	23%	26%	23%	22%
Languages	NA	6%	NA	9%
Other	NA	NA	11%	11%
Postsecondary Programs	15%	8%	16%	21%

Source: WSAC analysis of Mainstay data as of 6/29/26.

Note: Cells with a value of NA reflect that students' questions to the bot did not reference these topics. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table C5: Final FAFSA Completion Rates for Chatbot Users in Pilot Regions vs. Statewide

	Final Completion Rate	S + G (%)	Guardian Only (%)	Student Only (%)	Neither (%)
All Partners	60%	67%	57%	54%	60%
Elma and East Grays Harbor HS	65%	*	66%	*	62%
FuturesNW	44%	57%	36%	39%	45%
Highline Public Schools	63%	69%	63%	57%	60%
LaunchNW	60%	64%	54%	52%	62%
Quincy High School	72%	*	69%	*	71%
Statewide	56%	60%	50%	57%	56%

Source: WSAC analysis of FAFSA data, as of October 5, 2026.

Note: Table reflects final completion rates for all students enrolled in pilot schools vs. statewide, categorized based on their chatbot enrollment status. All final rates correspond to the last week for which WSAC actively monitors completion for each cohort. For the Class of 2026, that date was October 5, 2026. Rates in this table may not match other statewide calculations due to the match process between OtterBot user data and financial aid completion status. * indicates suppression due to small cell size or for cross-group suppression.

Appendix D: Glossary

Term	Definitions
#Pause(s)	Users can block messages temporarily for 2 weeks by sending #pause. The pause lasts for about two weeks.
Active Engagement	Active engagement occurs when the user sends messages back to the chatbot.
Audience	An audience defines the group receiving a specific message. It can be changed or revised based on whether and how users respond to interactive scripts.
Engagement	Prior to this year, engagement was inclusive of opt-outs, invalid phone numbers, active engagement, and passive engagement. In 2026, WSAC staff redefined engagement as being either Active or Passive. When calculating active engagement, WSAC uses the following formula: *(Active messages to bot) / (Active + Passive Users)*.
Individuals Contacted	Individuals contacted is a report that can be downloaded on the Mainstay platform and specified by audience, time-bound, and can give grad years.
Interactive Campaign	Interactive campaigns occur when a user is prompted to respond to the chatbot through surveys, multiple-choice questions, or open-text prompts.
Nudge Campaign	Nudges occur when users are sent reminders that may not elicit a response.
Opt-Outs	Events that opt-out a user permanently. These include “STOP” messages, the “#pause” dialog when pause forever is selected, opt-out script actions, and manual opt-outs.
Passive Engagement	Passive engagement occurs when the user receives messages but does not send any back to the chatbot.
Primary Content Areas	The primary content areas show the questions and resources each audience is actively seeking, ensuring that the chatbot delivers relevant, community-specific support.

Endnotes

[1] Throughout this report, "pilot schools," "pilot regions," and "regional chatbot partners" are used synonymously to refer to the schools that received regionalized messages through a regional partner's participation in the pilot. Specific schools included in each partner region can be found in Appendix A.

[2] For additional information on the behavioral science principles integrated into the OtterBot messages, see: Fife, Jason. (August 2020). *How Behavioral Science Encourages Students to Take Action*. Mainstay. https://mainstay.com/blog/how-behavioral-science-encourages-students-to-take-action/; see also: n.a., (n.d.). *Learn: What do we mean when we say behavioral science?.* ideas43. https://www.ideas42.org/learn/ .

[3] This was the second time that WSAC added a large user group, leading to similar overall user counts for the 2024-25 AY and 2025-26 AY. In Spring 2025, WSAC added a large group of high school seniors in the Class of 2025 that had not previously been enrolled in the bot. WSAC did this again in November 2025 with high school seniors in the Class of 2026.

[4] For details on Highline Public Schools' FutureU event, see: *Future U is April 1*. District New Posts - Highline Public Schools. (2026, March 10). https://www.highlineschools.org/departments/communications/news/new-posts/~board/district-news/post/futureu-is-april-1

[5] For details on FuturesNW's Learning with Leaders Event, see: *Learning with Leaders*. FuturesNW. (n.d.). https://www.futuresnw.org/learning-with-leaders

[6] For King County flooding, see:
KOMO News Staff. (2026, January 6). *Did record rainfall and historic flooding end Washington's longtime drought?* KOMO News. https://komonews.com/news/local/did-record-rainfall-end-washingtons-drought-flooding-rain-storm-atmospheric-river-climate-change-snowpack-weather-forecast-water-supply-agriculture-economy-la-nina; see also Skagit County flooding: Borden, M., Jeffries, A., Wing, J., & White, A. (2025, December 11). *Flooding impacts tens of thousands as Washington anticipates Federal Aid*. KNKX Public Radio. https://www.knkx.org/public-health/2025-12-11/washington-flooding-evacuation-snohomish-skagit-whatcomb ; see also Whatcom County flooding: KIRO 7 News Staff. (2025, December 15). *Historic flooding: Whatcom county - need to know*. KIRO 7 News Seattle. https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/historic-flooding-whatcom-county-evacuations/P22M5SAMD5EUTNPCFQBGQVT4CQ/

[7] For Spokane wildfires, see: Siegler, K., & Neuman, S. (2026, August 3). *Washington wildfires destroy homes, force thousands to evacuate*. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2026/08/03/nx-s1-5918018/washington-spokane-wildfires-evacuations