



What We Know: Regional Challenge Grants

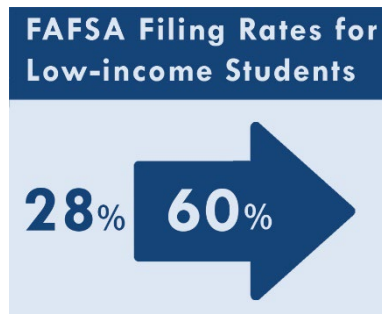
March 2025

Partnerships funded by the Washington Student Achievement Council's (WSAC) Regional Challenge Grant (RCG) are only in their second year of funded work. Still, early evidence makes clear the impact of these disciplined investments. Financial aid application rates, high school graduation rates, and even college retention rates—these critical indicators are already improving as regional partnerships shift educational culture for K-12 students, adults, and families.

Community-led solutions to educational challenges can *and will* sustainably increase the number of Washingtonians with postsecondary education and training.

Selected Early Impacts and Outcomes

For partnerships that begin their investment with us in the early implementation phase, WSAC focuses the first two years on helping the partnership gather early evidence of impact on the populations served by place-based strategies. This approach enables WSAC to monitor program impact and identify the potential effect of scaling strategies to new populations and regions.



In Riverside, district-wide supports increased FAFSA filing and graduation rates

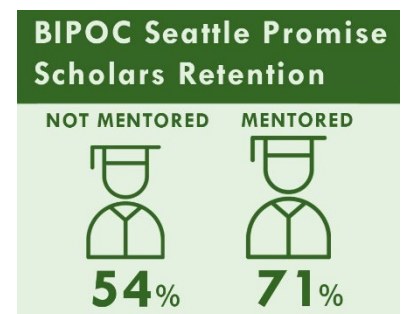
In the rural school district of Riverside, MPower provided nearly all high school students with mentorship and individualized coaching on career pathways. After one year, the district's FAFSA filing rates for low-income students increased from 28% to 60%, and its high school graduation rate for this same population of students increased from 90% to more than 96%.

A dual-generation approach led more adults to pursue new pathways

Chehalis School Districts' Cornerstone Program provides dual-generation support to both elementary school-aged children and their families/parents. In the first year of operation, Cornerstone served 140 families with over 200 elementary school-aged children. Among parents who received consistent support, 23% reported that they pursued meaningful changes in their education and career path.

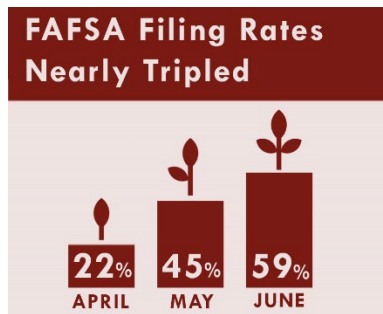
Mentors significantly increased college retention among Seattle BIPOC students

In Seattle, the Postsecondary Student Success Network (PSSN), led by the City of Seattle's Department of Education and Early Learning, provides mentorship to BIPOC high school juniors and seniors and Seattle Promise scholars. After the first year of RCG-funded work, the retention rate for mentored BIPOC Seattle Promise scholars at the Seattle Colleges is 17 percentage points higher than that for BIPOC scholars not mentored (71% vs. 54%).



Tacoma's FAFSA filing rates hit a record high despite last year's federal roll-out

Despite challenges caused by the FAFSA Simplification Act, FAFSA completions in Tacoma Public Schools increased by 8 percentage points from 2023 to 2024, a promising sign of the collective impact approach backed by the Foundation for Tacoma Students (FFTS).



In Mabton, FAFSA filing rates nearly tripled in two months, from 22% to 59%

The Yakima Valley Partners for Education (YVPE) developed an intentionally sequenced strategy where residents can access local, trusted Spanish-speaking tax preparers before filing for financial aid. YVPE partner Mabton School District quickly accelerated FAFSA filing in Spring 2024, going from 22% in April to 45% in May and 59% in June. By September, the 64% filing rate in Mabton exceeded the state rate of 49% by 15 percentage points.

Selected Evidence of Innovative Collaboration in Underserved Regions

For partnerships that begin their investment with us in the incubation stage, we focus the first two years on how the partnership builds its structure alongside the communities it serves. Many partnerships at this stage are already piloting work as they continue partnership building.

Local leaders in Kiona-Benton City mobilized a vast partnership network

The STEM Foundation partnership, which operates in the rural Kiona-Benton City (Ki-Be) school district, doubled its network size in just one year, growing from 10 to 20 partners by intentionally recruiting more partners from the rural community where it operates. The partnership implements dual-generation strategies to provide rural migrant families with college and career access.

School leaders in the Methow Valley integrate community into K-12 learning

In the Methow Valley, the school district-led partnership facilitates cross-generational matchmaking where students engage in internships and apprenticeships with local employers. Over 90% of students at the district's alternative high school are interning with one of 28 local employers.



In the Blue Mountains, a local nonprofit is building trust with community experts

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. The advisory groups are led by a Community Advocate, whose bridging role will ensure that future planning reflects each community's strengths and assets while promoting students' agency over their own decision-making.

About WSAC's Regional Partnerships

The WSAC's Regional Partnerships (RP) strategy invests in cross-sector partnerships 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. For more, see the [2024 RCG Legislative Report](#).

For More on the Early Impacts of WSAC's RP Strategy

The 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 (*forthcoming*)

RP's Theory of Change

A regional culture that values educational opportunities for all residents will improve educational attainment more than any one program or intervention. WSAC believes that the work of cross-sector, community-based collaborations can nurture this culture alongside local populations, and the combination of local work and state dollars offers regional partnerships the capacity to do exactly this. In contrast to state-level officials, local community members can shape student outcomes from a position of deep community knowledge, trust, and needs. Furthermore, a regional partnership's learning becomes statewide learning that can ignite the creation of state policies that close institutional gaps in educational access and outcomes.



About the Washington Student Achievement Council

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

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

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

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

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