Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

**REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE**

# Update: Project Education Impact Annual Report
## 2025

## Authorizing Legislation: RCW 28A.300.544

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many students experiencing foster care, homelessness, or juvenile justice face significant challenges that hinder their educational success. Recognizing these disparities, the Washington State Legislature formed the Project Education Impact (PEI) Workgroup in 2018, a coalition composed of state legislators, state agencies, youth-serving agencies, and nonprofits. The Workgroup's charge is to make recommendations that will serve to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities and promote parity in educational outcomes between these vulnerable student groups and their peers. PEI focuses on providing recommendations to create educational parity for students in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or experiencing juvenile justice by 2028.

The following policy recommendations regarding school stability will benefit all three student populations by creating universal standards and practices.

## General Policy Recommendation

The PEI workgroup recommends extending state statutes, related to school stability for students in foster care, to include students experiencing homelessness and institutional education.

## Recommendations by Student Population

The following is a summary of the 2025 recommendations by student population:

### Students Experiencing Foster Care

Early Learning:

- Require an automatic referral to Early Support for Infants and Toddlers (ESIT) for children, under 3 years of age, entering foster care.
- Expand the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) programs and the number of Child Welfare Learning Navigators (CWELN), with an emphasis on Tribal CWELN navigators

K–12:

- Require Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF), Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), and representative from tribal child welfare to collaborate on the creation of a school Transition Checklist.
- Require OSPI and DCYF to establish data sharing protocol to monitor and publicly report on foster care placements and school transitions outside of natural school promotion.

Postsecondary:

- Increase funding for the Passport to Careers program to ensure students receive full awards.

- Automatically enroll students in foster care in Guaranteed Education Tuition (GET) accounts and integrate this benefit with the Passport to Careers program.

## Students Experiencing Homelessness

Early Learning:

- Require all preschool and child development providers to participate in annual McKinney-Vento trainings.
- Prioritize infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness for preschool programs.
- Incentivize community and technical colleges to preserve campus-based preschool and childcare programs to support student parents experiencing homelessness.
- Require all early childhood and housing and homeless assistance programs to publish an annual report on infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness.

K–12:

- Restore funding for the Homeless Student Stability Education program (HSSEP).
- Maintain funding for the Homeless Student Stability Program (HSSP) for community-based organizations.
- Establish federal McKinney-Vento provisions in state law with the addition of a training requirement.

Postsecondary:

- Maintain funding for the Passport to Careers program.
- Implement PEI Foster Care Subcommunities postsecondary recommendation to include unaccompanied youth.

## Students Experiencing Juvenile Justice

Governance:

- Require all juvenile justice facilities to publicly report how many students miss scheduled classes and the reasons for absences or school closure.

Facilities:

- Ensure educators have access to professional development that is culturally responsive and trauma informed

Instructional:

- Require instructional practices and curriculum used in juvenile justice facilities is public-facing, culturally relevant, and trauma informed and that mastery-based options are available for students.

# INTRODUCTION

The Project Education Impact Workgroup (PEI) is a coalition of state agencies, state committees, and community-based organizations. PEI focuses on providing recommendations to create educational parity for students in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or experiencing juvenile justice by 2028. The three PEI student groups include some similar characteristics, such as higher-than-average rates of school transfers and lower than average high school and post-secondary completion. To address the disparate educational outcomes, PEI aspires to build and sustain coordinated systems to support these students in achieving their educational goals.

## Legislative Direction

House Bill 1679 (2023) was the latest revision of Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 6032 (2018) and Substitute House Bill 2711 (2020). As codified in the Revised Code of Washington (RCW) 28A.300.544(2), PEI shall develop recommendations to promote the following for student who are in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or in or exiting juvenile justice facilities:

A. The achievement of parity in educational outcomes with the general student population.
B. The elimination of racial and ethnic disparities for educational outcomes compared to the general student population.

This report, required by RCW 28A.300.544(3)(d)(i), identifies:

A. Progress the State has made toward achieving education parity for students in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or in or exiting juvenile justice facilities.
B. Recommendations that can be implemented using existing resources, rules, and regulations, and those that would require policy, administrative, and resource allocation changes prior to implementation.

## Student Group Definitions

The Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) supports PEI with data analysis. To better understand the long-term impacts of policies for students, ERDC developed a cohort model that tracks students' educational progress and outcomes over time. The first set of cohorts begin in kindergarten; the second set begins in 8th grade (see Appendix A for a more detailed description of the cohorts). PEI along with ERDC defined each student group[1]

- **Students in Foster Care:** Youth who were in the Office of Child Welfare Services placement and care authority as identified through the Department of Children, Youth,

[1] The definitions developed by ERDC do not include students who experience homelessness or enter into the justice system after high school.

and Families (DCYF) records, age 3–21 from the 2012–2023 calendar year. Youth in Tribal Child Welfare or Federal Foster Care are not included in this data.

- **Students Experiencing Homelessness:** Youth identified through K–12 records as experiencing homelessness (as defined by the McKinney-Vento Act) from the 2012–2024 school years.
- **Students Experiencing Institutional Education in Juvenile Justice facilities:**[2] Youth under age 21 who were ever enrolled in education programs at adult jails, long-term juvenile institutions, habilitation centers or county detention centers, according to Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) records and students who received basic education under a Department of Corrections (DOC) contract according to the State Board for Community and Technical College's records from the 2012–2024 school year.

These student groups are not mutually exclusive, and students can be included in one or more groups within a given school year or over multiple school years.

[2] ERDC data is inclusive of data for students residing in habilitation centers. Per legislative directive recommendations in this report are focused only on student in juvenile justice facilities.

# PROGRESS TOWARD ACHIEVING EDUCATIONAL PARITY

PEI defines parity to mean that students in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or experiencing juvenile justice will have the same education outcomes—measured by kindergarten readiness, high school graduation rates, and post-secondary education or apprenticeship enrollment and completion rates—as their peers. Such parity can only be accomplished by prioritizing educational equity for these student groups.

There are other important metrics for understanding education parity including additional data points provided by ERDC under RCW 28A.300.544(3)(i). Appendix A includes all required The Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) data. State agencies and partners also have data that is not collected by ERDC that informs student group progress toward parity and appears in this report.

Progress toward achieving education parity is mixed with some metrics showing progress and others showing widening gaps between student groups and all students. The gaps for students earning high school diplomas and enrolling in 4-year postsecondary education closed over the same period of time for the 8th grade cohort regardless of PEI student group.

## Kindergarten Readiness

The kindergarten cohort was used to analyze progress toward parity (see Appendix A, tables 3-1 to 3-5 and Appendix B tables 3-1a to 3-5a). For students in foster care and students experiencing homelessness, the data from the 2012 Kindergarten Cohort to the 2016 Kindergarten Cohort show an increase in the number of students participating in the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS)[3]. While participation has increased, the percent of students who were assessed *and* were ready for kindergarten has decreased for most of the six WaKIDS metrics: cognitive, language, literacy, math, physical, and social emotional.

Figure 1 shows the widening gaps for students experiencing foster care or homelessness when compared to the statewide student group. For example, between 2012 and 2016 students experiencing foster care saw a 9.4 percentage point decrease in the percentage of students ready for kindergarten in the math domain. This decrease is compared to a 1.2 percentage point increase for students across the state and the gap between the two student groups widens by 10.6 percentage points. An analysis of progress toward parity for WaKIDS by race and ethnicity showed mixed results. For example, in the literacy measure students of two or more races experiencing foster care had a 3.6 percentage point increase in the percentage of students ready for kindergarten while students of two

[3] The WaKIDS was first administered in 2012 to select schools throughout the state and expanded until 2016 when all schools in the state were to administer the evaluation. This intentional expansion explains the increase in participation between 2012 and 2016 data.

or more races experiencing homelessness had a 4.5 percentage point decrease. Both can be compared to the statewide percentage for students of two or more races, a group that had a 2.8 percentage point increase.

**Figure 1: WaKIDS Assessment Gaps (Kindergarten Cohort) Shown as Percentage Point (PP) Change**

| Student Group | 2012–2016 Change in Percentage Point Change Ready Math | Gap Narrowed | 2012–2016 Change in Percent Ready Literacy | Gap Narrowed |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Statewide | 1.2 PPs | - | 6.7 | - |
| Experiencing Foster Care | 9.4 PPs | No | 0.8 | No |
| Experiencing Homelessness | 9.2 PPs | No | -1.4 | No |

**Source:** ERDC Appendix, Tables 3-5 and 3-4

# High School Graduation

The data for high school graduation shows mixed results with reaching parity. The analysis conducted by ERDC shows the count and percent of students who earned a high school diploma, who earned a General Educational Development (GED) and who did not earn a high school credential (figure 2 shows only high school graduations rates—other measures can be found in Appendix A, Table 2-8 and Appendix B, Table 2-8a). When looking at parity for earning a high school diploma, two of three PEI student groups narrowed gaps. For example, Figure 2 shows that 43 percentage of students experiencing foster care in the 2012 8th grade cohort graduated high school, which was 34 percentage points below statewide graduation. By the 2016 8$^{th}$ grade cohort, the percent of students experiencing foster care graduating increased to 57% (a 14 percentage point increase) and narrowed the gap by eight percentage points). However, the high school diploma gap for students experiencing juvenile justice widened by one percentage point when compared to the all students group. When analyzing data by race/ethnicity, the results are mixed by PEI student group and race/ethnicity. For example, Black or African American students in foster care narrowed the high school diploma gap by nearly 20 percentage points compared to Black or African American student statewide; however, the gap for Black or African American students experiencing juvenile justice did not change.

**Figure 2: Progress toward Parity for High School Graduation Rates Shown Percentage Point (PP) Change (8th Grade Cohort)**

| Student Group | 2012 HS Diploma | 2012 Gap (Change in Percentage Point Change) | 2016 HS Diploma | 2016 Gap (Change in Percentage Point Change) | Gap Narrowed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All Students | 77% | – | 84% | – | – |
| Experiencing Foster Care | 43% | 34 PPs | 57% | 27 PPs | Yes |
| Experiencing Homelessness | 55% | 22 PPs | 63% | 21 PPs | Yes |
| Experiencing Juvenile Justice | 24% | 53 PPs | 30% | 54 PPs | No |

**Source:** Appendix A, Table 2-8

# Postsecondary Enrollment

Postsecondary enrollment[4] data shows small gaps for two-year postsecondary enrollment and closing gaps for four-year postsecondary enrollment. However, four-year postsecondary enrollment gap changes are not due to an increase in enrollment for student groups, but a decrease in enrollment for all students. Figure 3 shows the four-year postsecondary enrollment gap decreases from the 2012 8th grade cohort from 36 percentage points to 33 percentage points with enrollment for student experiencing juvenile justice remains static. (See Appendix A, Table 5-1 and Appendix B, Table 5-1a for excluded data points.)

**Figure 3: Enrollment at a Four-Year Postsecondary Institution Shown as Percentage Point (PP) Change (8th Grade Cohort)**

| Student Group | 2012 Postsecondary Enrollment | 2012 Gap (Change in Percentage Point Change) | 2016 Postsecondary Enrollment | 2016 Gap (Change in Percentage Point Change) | Gap Narrowed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All Students | 40% | – | 37% | – | – |
| Experiencing Foster Care | 11% | 34 PPs | 12% | 25 PPs | Yes |
| Experiencing Homelessness | 13% | 27 PPs | 12% | 25 PPs | Yes |
| Experiencing Juvenile Justice | 4% | 36 PPs | 4% | 33 PPs | Yes |

**Source:** ERDC, Appendix A, Table 5-1.

[4] Highest level of postsecondary enrollment within 8 years of 8th grade is categorized as no postsecondary enrollment, enrollment at a 2-year institution, and enrollment at a 4-year institution.

# Postsecondary Completion

Postsecondary completion[5] data also show a mixed picture for achieving parity. While metrics show a narrowing of gaps, some are due to a relative decrease where both the student group and statewide student data show a decline over time. For example, 36% of all students in the 2012 8th grade cohort who ever enrolled in postsecondary education earned a bachelor's or graduate degree compared to 3% of students experiencing juvenile justice in the same cohort (figure 4). That 33 percentage point gap decreased by one percentage point when the statewide student group experienced a two percentage point decrease between the 2012 cohort and the 2014 cohort compared to the one percentage point decrease for students experiencing juvenile justice.

Moreover, students who experience homelessness, foster care, or juvenile justice have significantly lower postsecondary enrollment rates compared to the general student population. The fewer students that enroll, the fewer that complete. Appendix B, Table 5-2a elevates this point as counts of students disaggregated by race and ethnicity are so low much of the data is hidden to protect student privacy.

**Figure 4: Bachelor's or Graduate Degree Attainment Shown as Percentage Point (PP) Change (8th Grade Cohort)**

| Student Group | 2012 Postsecondary Completion | 2012 Gap (Change in Percentage Point Change) | 2014 Postsecondary Completion | 2014 Gap (Change in Percentage Point Change) | Gap Narrowed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All Students | 36% | – | 34% | – | – |
| Experiencing Foster Care | 6% | 30 PPs | 6% | 28 PPs | Yes |
| Experiencing Homelessness | 11% | 25 PPs | 9% | 25 PPs | No |
| Experiencing Juvenile Justice | 3% | 33 PPs | 2% | 32 PPs | Yes |

**Source:** ERDC, Appendix A, Table 5-2.

[5] Highest postsecondary degree earned within ten years of 8th grade.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The PEI Workgroup is putting forward recommendations by four subcommittees. Each subcommittee drafted and presented recommendations to the steering committee. The structure and tone of the recommendations reflect the work of each of the following subcommittee groups: Policy, Foster Care Education, Homeless Education, and Juvenile Justice Education.

Sections were written to be read in the context of the whole report or individually.

## Policy Recommendations

School stability is a foundational component for educational success. Nearly 50,000 students in Washington experienced homelessness or involvement in the court system (child welfare or juvenile justice) in the 2023–2024 school year[6]. These student populations share many common experiences, including frequent school mobility[7,8].

Lack of stability can make it hard for these students to participate in extracurricular activities or access consistent special education services. Many of these students:

- Miss critical instructional hours.
- May be placed in classroom settings that do not meet their individualized needs, creating barriers to meaningful engagement and learning.
- Are placed in repetitive courses.
- Experience difficulties building relationships with teachers and peers.

These factors combined can contribute to lower academic achievement, disengagement in school, and higher dropout rates for these student populations.

Many schools struggle to support the educational needs of students who experience foster care, homelessness, or the juvenile justice system. The negative impacts of frequent school moves can be compounded when records and transcripts transfers are delayed or incomplete; issues with information transfer impacts students' placement in appropriate classes or support services. Addressing student mobility through a coordinated system of polices and supportive practices is critical to help reduce the negative effects of frequent school moves.

Education policies that prioritize continuity can help set a foundation for educational success.

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[6] In the 2023–24 school year there were 41,050 students experiencing homelessness, 3,317 students experiencing foster care, and 2,747 students experiencing the juvenile justice system for a total of 47,114 students. Accessed from the OSPI Report Card, August 2025.

[7] Stapleton, Katina, Institute of education Sciences, Accessed August 11, 2025 Systemic Approaches to Educating Highly Mobile Students | IES

[8] Appendix A, Table 2-2 and Appendix B, Table 2-2a.

There is currently a patchwork of state and federal laws extending certain protections and rights to students based on their court involvement or housing status; however, these laws are inconsistent across student populations requiring different actions, policies, and procedures. Aligning state statutes for students experiencing homelessness, foster care, or institutional education—who all have similar mobility and educational needs—will ensure consistency between federal law and state statutes. Unified policy and procedures will help lay a foundation for educational parity for these student groups with the general student population. Consistent policies and procedures are an important component to support stability amidst disruptions. A clear and consistent policy framework would ensure these students groups receive timely access to records, assessments, and appropriate interventions, allowing educators to address their unique needs more effectively.

The PEI workgroup recommends extending the following state statutes, related to school stability for students in foster care, to include students experiencing homelessness and institutional education:

1. RCW 28A.225.330 Enrolling students from other districts:
   - Prevents school districts from denying or delaying the enrollment of dependent youth.
   - Requires school districts to retrieve school records (educational history) within two business days.
2. RCW 28A.225.350 Students in out-of-home care—best interest determinations:
   - Best interest determinations must be made as quickly as possible to prevent educational discontinuity for the student.
   - Every effort must be made to gather meaningful input from relevant persons. Student-centered factors must be used to determine what is in a student's best interest.
   - Student must remain in his or her school of origin while a best interest determination is made and while disputes are resolved.
   - The special education services of a student must not be interrupted by a transfer to a new school.
3. RCW 28A.150.510 Transmittal of education records—disclosure of education records—data-sharing agreements. Add students in state institutions to the definition.

# Students Experiencing Foster Care Recommendations

This subcommittee provided recommendations and background for recommendations in three education categories: Early Learning, K–12, and Postsecondary.

## Early Learning

Children in Washington's foster care system face systemic barriers in accessing early learning and developmental supports. Foster care is an intervention, but too often children are placed too far from their early learning center, their school, or their own school district, where access to developmental screening and services can be missed. Early education is prevention, and access is crucial. A 2021 Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) report shows foster children consistently lag behind peers on kindergarten readiness where only 28% of foster children were kindergarten ready in 2020

compared to over 50% of non-foster peers.[9] Appendix A to this report, which used a different methodology than the 2021 ERDC report, shows widening gaps for math and literacy readiness (see Figure 1). Making entry into foster care an automatic trigger for early evaluation and screening referrals could help identify and address developmental concerns earlier.

Research shows that early intervention matters. Brain development in the first three years is rapid, and the absence of timely evaluation or support can set children back for years to come. Cuts to mental health and developmental services have worsened these gaps, leaving foster children and their caregivers without consistent, accessible resources.[10] In Washington, early learning interventions often occur too late and inequitably, for example the Early Support for Infants and Toddlers (ESIT) referrals often occur after age two, leaving only months before services end at age three and American Indian/Alaska Native children are under-represented in ESIT enrollment (see Footnote 7). Specific to serving American Indian/Alaska Native students, The Native Perspectives on Educational Equity report emphasizes that equity for Tribal students requires sovereignty-centered approaches.[11]

Washington has piloted solutions that show promise. Programs such as ESIT, Child Welfare Early Learning Navigators (CWELN), and Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) showed measurable benefits for young children and families.

- CWELN began as a pilot under the Preschool Development Grant and is now sustained through Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) resources administered by DCYF. The program served 6,020 families between 2019 and 2021 and showed a 61% increase in families being identified and referred to services.[12] Additionally, evaluation of the CWELN pilot report demonstrated that navigation significantly improves service-connection rates for CPS-involved families Despite this progress, the need is far greater than current staffing allows. There is only one Tribal CWELN serving all 29 Tribes in Washington, and because this role supports all Native children, including those connected to the 574 federally recognized Tribes nationally, the demand is especially high. Without expansion of CWELN capacity and intentional inclusion of Tribes in program design and implementation, foster children, especially Tribal children, will continue to be denied access to critical early learning supports. Tribal IECMHC efforts are already underway, with strong Tribal engagement and sustainability planning.
- Research from the Center of Excellence demonstrated that IECMHC reduces suspensions, strengthens caregiver skills, and narrows racial disparities (see Footnote 8). Washington's FY

[9] Education Research and Data Center (ERDC). (2021). *Educational outcomes of children in foster care: 2021 report.* Olympia, WA: Washington Office of Financial Management. https://erdc.wa.gov/reports/educational-outcomes-children-foster-care-2021-report

[10] Center of Excellence for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation. (2023). *The impact of infant and early childhood mental health consultation: Reducing suspensions, strengthening caregivers, and narrowing disparities.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University. https://www.iecmhc.org/resources/research/

[11] Native Education Forum. (2022). *Native perspectives on educational equity.* Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. Native Perspectives on Educational (In)equity Washington (2022)

[12] Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF). (2021). *Child Welfare Early Learning Navigator (CWELN) pilot evaluation report.* Olympia, WA. https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/CWELN.pdf

2024 proviso invested $260,000 to launch a Tribal IECMHC initiative, already reaching multiple Tribal communities.[13]

The PEI workgroup recommend the following:

1. Require an automatic ESIT Referral:
    a. Require that all children under age 3 entering foster care are automatically referred to ESIT (low cost).
2. The expansion of IECMHC:
    a. Provide state funding to build on the Tribal IECMHC proviso to expand culturally congruent consultation for foster children and caregivers statewide (modest cost).

## K–12

Youth in foster enrolled in elementary and secondary education experience out-of-school disruptions that can lead to an increased number of school transitions within a school year, disrupted lines of communication between district and school leaders and caretakers, and worse academic outcomes.

Students in foster care experience more school transitions than their non-foster care peers,[14] often because of court involvement and placement changes. While the educational stability protections in Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) focus on reducing school mobility and seamless transitions when a school move is necessary,[15] approximately 95% of students in foster care experience at least one unplanned school change within a single academic year.[16]

Perhaps part of the challenge is the complexity of transitions. Each school transition carries the risk of critical information; for example, data about student attendance, Response to Intervention, evaluations, 504 plans, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), Behavior Intervention Plans, discipline, or trauma responses being lost or overlooked. The result of lost or overlooked information creates disruptions in both educational continuity, progress, and stability. Delays in enrollment, confusion around services, and gaps in communication are common when multiple adults – social workers, parents, caregivers, attorneys, school staff, and others – are making decisions without access to the same information. Without a centralized way to share critical details, students are left vulnerable to missed opportunities and repeated disruptions in their education.

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[13] Washington State Legislature. (2023). Operating budget proviso: Infant and early childhood mental health consultation for Tribes (FY 2024). https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=5187&Year=2023

[14] Appendix A, Table 2-2. Appendix B, Table 2-2a.

[15] Clemens, E. V., Klopfenstein, K., Tis, M., & Lalonde, T. L. (2017). Educational stability policy and the interplay between child welfare placements and School Moves. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 83, 209–217. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.11.003

[16] Ryan, J. B., Hurley, Z., & Randall, K. N. (2025). Addressing the educational needs of Foster Children. *Beyond Behavior*, 34(1), 35–45. https://doi.org/10.1177/10742956241313107

Additionally, students involved in Tribal Child Welfare and Unaccompanied Refugee Minor programs encounter unique challenges which can undermine their overall stability. Frequent transitions are especially disruptive, as high mobility often compromises their sense of security and connection to cultural identity.[17]

Despite federal and state provisions addressing these school moves with protections such as ensuring immediate enrollment, timely transfer of records, transportation rights, and required Best Interest Determination (BID) meetings, students in foster care are still experiencing transitions filled with delays and negative academic impacts.

While many students in foster care are connected to specialized programs and support, both in and out of school, information about these programs and supports is not always consistently communicated across systems. Compliance with federal and state requirements, such as immediate enrollment and BIDs, is hampered when partners do not have access to the same set of essential information. These challenges are not limited to placement-related transitions but also occur during routine school changes (for example, moving from elementary school to middle school or moving out of high school). Lack of communication during these transitions leads to unnecessary and sometimes re-traumatizing setbacks for students.

During the 2024–2025 academic year, Treehouse, a nonprofit organization focused on the educational needs of student in foster care, encountered several challenges affecting the educational stability of students in foster care, particularly in coordinating essential procedures like BID meetings. In numerous instances, there was confusion, lack of knowledge, and misunderstanding around the goals of BID's and the process by child welfare social workers and education leads as well as new foster care liaisons. Consequently, school placement decisions were often initiated without the collaborative determination process, leading to significant delays in enrollment and disruptions to academic continuity, including transportation arrangements, special education services, and the implementation of 504 plans.

These district-based communication challenges reveal a broader systemic breakdown in interagency communication and a lack of clarity regarding roles and procedural steps. A lack of interagency coordination and co-operation may result in one of the most daunting barriers to the educational progress of students in foster care.[18] While collaboration among OSPI, school districts and DCYF outlined in both federal and state law, collaboration in and of itself is often not enough to support students in foster care.

One example of interagency communication can be found in data sharing protocols; however, those too can be limited in scope. OSPI and DCYF have a data sharing agreement in place to identify

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[17] Arviso, D., Guerrettaz, A. M., Phillips, L., & Wynne, M. (2021). *Native perspectives on educational (in)equity in Washington state: Reclaiming educational sovereignty: A report to the Washington Education Association*. https://www.education.uw.edu/ejr/files/2022/03/NATIVE-PERSPECTIVES-ON-EDUCATIONAL-EQUITY-1.14.22.docx_R.pdf

[18] Ferguson, H. B., & Wolkow, K. (2012). Educating children and youth in care: A review of barriers to school progress and strategies for change. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(6), 1143–1149. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.01.034

students in foster care; however, there is currently no mechanism to recognize students served by Tribal Child Welfare or those classified as Unaccompanied Refugee Minors. As a result, the available data may not accurately represent these groups or reflect their educational stability and developmental outcomes.

The PEI workgroup recommends the following:

A standardized transition checklist would help ensure that all parties responsible for supporting student educators, social workers, caregivers, and others—have the same information at the same time, resulting in smoother transitions and less disruption for students. Developing this tool collaboratively will advance a proactive approach that strengthens cross-system communication and minimizes disruptions to student learning.

1. Direct OSPI, DCYF, DSHS, and Representatives from Tribal Child Welfare to create a School Transition Checklist for all foster youth, including youth in Tribal Child Welfare and Unaccompanied Refugee Minors, for the purposes of ensuring smooth transitions during school changes.

    a. Development of the checklist should include input and partnership with direct service providers.

    b. A transition checklist would also be applicable and valuable for schools Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness (SSEH) and juvenile justice as they transition through the education system. Any state policy or guidance should be extended to these student groups.

Currently, school transfers among students in foster care are not systematically tracked by academic year. These transitions are a critical measure of educational stability, and the degree to which the state is operating in compliance with federal and state law. The absence of this data presents a gap in the ability to evaluate and improve outcomes. Implementing consistent tracking would enable policymakers to better assess student mobility, identify unmet transition needs, and inform targeted reforms in both child welfare and education systems. It would also help flag early indicators of academic disruption, allowing for more proactive and equitable interventions.

2. Require OSPI and DCYF to establish a coordinated data-sharing system to monitor and publicly report school transitions among students in foster care, alongside changes in foster care placements.

## Postsecondary

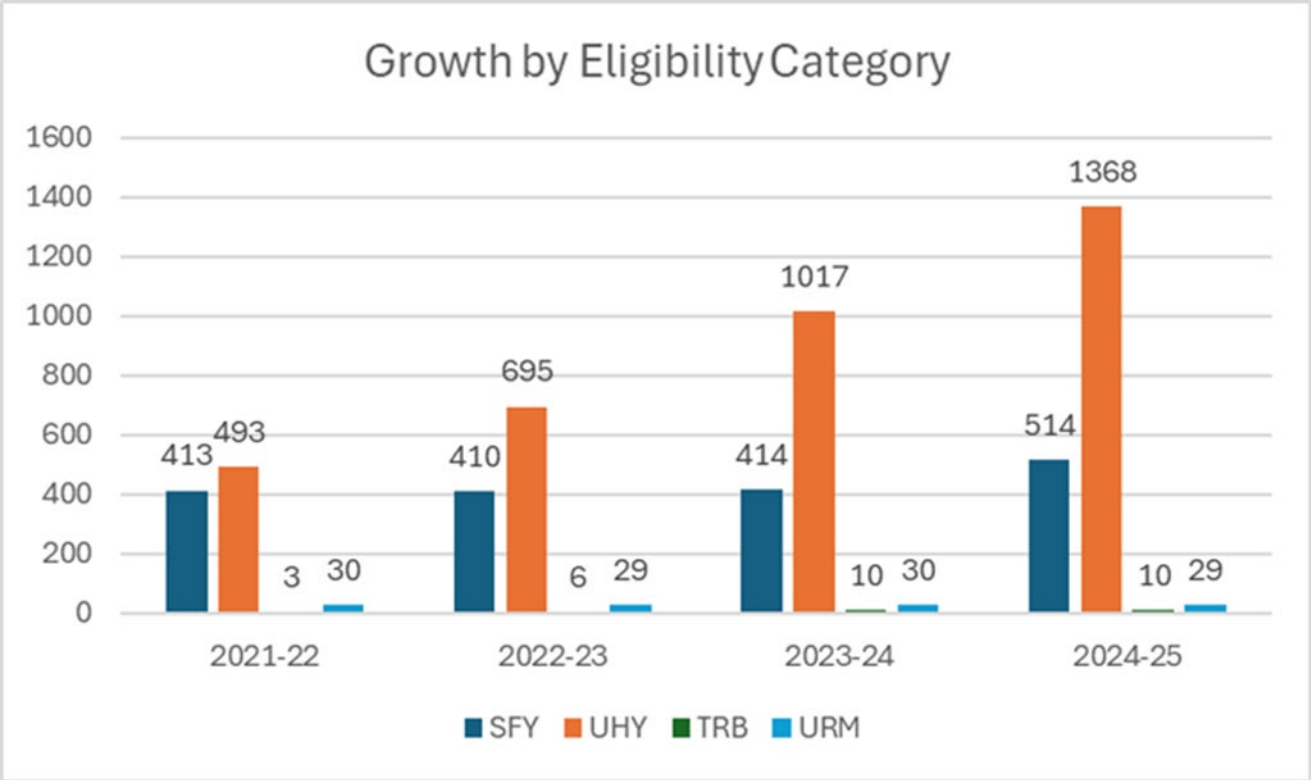
National data underscores the significant educational barriers faced by youth who have experienced foster care:

- Students who experience foster care remain some of the most educationally marginalized youth in the United States. However, rates of secondary and postsecondary outcomes vary

widely across studies, limiting ability to inform policy. Postsecondary enrollment rate ranges from 29% to 64%, and the postsecondary completion rate ranges from 8% to 12%.[19]

- Financial insecurity is one of the strongest predictors of college dropout for foster youth (The Century Foundation). Even when students enroll, unmet financial need often forces them to reduce course loads, work excessive hours, or leave school altogether.
- Consistent, well-designed support services can dramatically improve both retention and completion rates for this population. The Institute for Research on Poverty (University of Wisconsin) found that programs offering advising, mentoring, and wraparound supports result in significantly higher persistence and graduation rates compared to peers without access to such resources. Washington state faces the same challenges, as cuts to essential support services jeopardize the success of college-age students.

**Figure 5: Enrollment Growth in Postsecondary**




**Source:** WSAC, Passport to Careers Program, 2025

**SFY – State Foster Youth; **UHY** – Unaccompanied Homeless Youth; **TRB** – Tribal Foster Youth; **URM** – Unaccompanied Refugee Minors*

One resource for foster care youth enrolled in postsecondary education, The Passport to Careers scholarship, was designed to cover essential costs of attendance beyond tuition, such as housing, transportation, books, and food. This program has experienced increasing numbers of eligible students and funding that is not keeping pace with the program's growth. Because of this,

[19] Okpych, N. J., Whitman, K., Lee, J., Neria-Piña, L., Jackson, L. A., & Day, M. (2025). Secondary and Postsecondary Education Outcomes of Students with Experience in Foster Care: Systematic Review of the Literature From 2000–2023. *AERA Open*, *11*. https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584251331454 (Original work published 2025)

scholarships to students were reduced by 60% over the past two years, with annual academic awards shrinking from $5,000 in 2023 to $2,000 2025 (see figure 6) due to not receiving maintenance funding for Passport during the 2023 and 2024 legislative sessions. This decreased support and funding uncertainty undermines student planning, persistence, and long-term educational success.

**Figure 6: Passport to Careers Scholarship Program Enrollment and Funding**

| Academic Year | Students Served* | Year-over-Year Percentage | Annual Funding | Year-over-Year Percent Change |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2025–2026 | TBD | TBD | $6,999,000 | -13% |
| 2024–2025 | 1,921 | 31% | $7,999,000 | 14% |
| 2023–2024 | 1,471 | 29% | $6,999,000 | 0% |
| 2022–2023 | 1,140 | 21% | $6,999,000 | -3% |
| 2021–2022 | 940 | 6% | $7,185,000 | 105% |
| 2020–2021 | 884 | – | $3,509,000 | – |

**Source:** WSAC, 2025

*Student counts include *both* students in foster care and unaccompanied homeless youth. Student headcount includes those who were eligible for Passport but may not have received a scholarship because their financial need was met through other sources of financial aid.

While student awareness of the program has increased, the funding cannot meet current demand. Campus Designated Support Staff (DSS), who are the main contact for Passport student support related questions, including academic services, are critical to student success. DSS are overextended, and staff turnover further disrupts continuity of care and support. In addition, flexible support funds for urgent student needs are spread thin, creating challenges for student persistence and completion.

The PEI workgroup recommends the following:

1. Increase funding for the Passport to Careers (college and apprenticeships) Program to restore grant awards to their original amounts ($5,000/per student). This will ensure students receive full awards, rather than the partial awards ($2,000/per student) they receive now because of program growth ( i.e. more students qualifying).

Passport to Careers provides funding for postsecondary education for students who have experienced Foster Care and/or Unaccompanied Homelessness. PEI supports ensuring young adults who have experienced unaccompanied homelessness or foster care with reliable funding to achieve their educational goals and post-secondary training as this funding and education is crucial to improving outcomes for these populations.

2. Require all foster youth, beginning at age 13, to be enrolled in the Guaranteed Education Tuition (GET) program.

By investing at this stage, the state's contributions would have time to mature within the GET program, creating a predictable and stable source of support for future Passport cohorts. According to data received from DCYF, 314 youth entered care at age 13 between August 2024 and August 2025, providing a baseline for annual investment planning. (Source: WSAC)

In addition to building financial stability, this proposal would expand early outreach to middle school youth in care. Engagement at this stage would connect students to postsecondary options earlier, increasing awareness, readiness, and alignment with long-term education pathways.

3. Full Passport Match to Washington College Grant

Guarantee that all Passport to College-eligible students receive a Washington College Grant (WCG) award at the maximum level. The Washington College Grant is a need-based financial aid program that helps Washington state residents pay for education after high school. It can partially cover tuition and fees for eligible students at public and private colleges, universities, and registered apprenticeship program. This policy would ensure foster youth, starting as early as age 13, have a clear and reliable promise of up to six years of public college tuition and fee coverage.

During the 2024–25 academic year, 100% of Passport to College eligible students qualified for WCG, and 99.4% received the maximum award (see figure 7). Formalizing this alignment will provide stability, strengthen the state's commitment to equity, and reduce financial uncertainty for some of Washington's most vulnerable students. (Source: WSAC)

**Figure 7: Passport to College Scholarship Program Enrollment and Funding**

| Academic Year | Total PTC Recipients | Maximum WA Grant + PTC Recipients | Annual Funding | Year-over-Year Percent Change | PTC Recipients Getting Any WA Grants |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2024–2025 | 1,914 | 1,903 | 99.4% | 1,914 | 100% |
| 2023–2024 | 1,467 | 1,454 | 99.1% | 1,459 | 99.5% |
| 2022–2023 | 1,127 | 1,112 | 99.5% | 1,115 | 98.9% |
| 2021–2022 | 921 | 898 | 98.2% | 909 | 98.7% |
| 2020–2021 | 879 | 853 | 97.8% | 871 | 99.1% |

**Source:** WSAC, 2025

# Students Experiencing Homelessness Recommendations

This subcommittee provides recommendations and background for recommendations in three education categories: Early Learning, K–12, and Postsecondary.

## Early Learning

Infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness face high risks of developmental delays and educational setbacks due to limited access to early learning and support, frequent moves, and unhealthy living environments. Ensuring access to early childhood education is essential for their growth, readiness for school, and family stability. Homelessness from prenatal stages through age three can severely affect physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development, leading to long-term consequences.

According to The Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) data, while more students experiencing homelessness are ready for kindergarten than not, they still lag behind all students in terms of readiness, particularly in the areas of emotional, cognitive, and academic abilities.[20]

Infants and toddlers are particularly vulnerable to developmental delays, cognitive impairments, emotional and behavioral problems, and chronic health issues such as malnutrition and illnesses. These challenges can impact their ability to form healthy relationships and interact positively. The research is clear, the longer and earlier children experience homelessness, the greater the cumulative adverse health effects.

According to the Infant and Toddler Homelessness Across 50 States: 2022–2023 report produced by SchoolHouse Connection, in Washington state, of the 13,876 infants and toddlers identified as experiencing homelessness, 12,555, or 90.5% are NOT enrolled in early childhood development programs.

The PEI workgroup recommends the following:

1. Require all preschool and child development providers (not just those that are part of a public school district) to participate in training annually, on the definition of homelessness as outlined in the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act, and related rights and services.
2. Prioritize infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness for preschool programs.
3. Incentivize community colleges to preserve campus-based preschool and childcare programs for adult learners who need these services to continue their education and find, or maintain, employment.
    a. A fall 2024 Washington state survey of enrolled college students, Reassessing Basic Needs Security Among Washington College Students found that over half (52%) of students experience food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness. Rates of basic needs insecurity were substantially higher for college students who had

[20] Appendix A. Tables 3-1, 3-2, 3-3, 3-4, 3-5

experienced homelessness as youth (88%) and students with dependents (68%). For students with children, access to affordable childcare is a pervasive challenge to their educational aspirations. 76% of parenting college students are unable to afford childcare without concern about meeting other basic needs or accruing worrisome levels of debt. In the current state budget climate, some community colleges have decided to close their campus childcare centers this year, which will further exacerbate access to more affordable and proximate options for student parents. The Washington Student Achievement Council (WASC) and State Board for Community & Technical Colleges have identified the needs of parenting students as a key strategic priority and are launching regional community work sessions to better understand the landscape and imagine options to help address this crisis.

4. Improve data collection by directing all early childhood and housing/homeless assistance agencies to produce and publish an annual report on infants and toddlers experiencing homelessness served across programs. Reports should include early childhood development programs as well as state and local housing and homeless assistance services.

## K–12

Students experiencing homelessness while in K–12 system face significant and persistent barriers to educational access, stability, and success. These challenges include frequent school disruptions, inadequate access to basic needs, and limited support systems; all of which contribute to lower academic achievement and lower graduation rates. In addition, the dropout rate during 2023–24 school year for youth experiencing homelessness was 23.5%, nearly three times higher than average rate of 8.1% for students who were not experiencing homelessness.[21]

Factors that contribute to inequitable outcomes for students experiencing homelessness include:

- Barriers to enrollment, retention, and academic success due to the mobility created by a loss of housing, housing insecurity, and housing instability.
- Knowledge gaps – many educators, service providers, and the general population have a limited understanding of the McKinney-Vento Act, the educational definition of homelessness, and the provisions available through schools and community partners to support eligible students.[22]
- Underfunded, understaffed, and under resourced[23] programs within schools and communities necessary to fully support experiencing homelessness.

[21] Accessed from the 23-24 OSPI Report Card, October 2025.

[22] HSSEP grant applications continuously note a need to provide staff and community members with more training on the educational definition of homelessness and the provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act.

[23] Building Changes. *Homeless Student Stability Program: Interim Evaluation Report, SFY 2022-2025*. (report has not been published yet). And, OSPI Proviso Reports. *BA, BB 522(4)(b) Homeless Students*.

Without targeted interventions and sustained support, these vulnerable children and youth are at greater risk of falling behind their peers and missing opportunities for long-term well-being and self-sufficiency.

Since 2015, key policy changes have improved outcomes for this student population and brought them closer to educational parity. Passage of the Homeless Student Stability Opportunity Gap Act, administered jointly by OSPI and the Office of Homeless Youth (OHY), created dedicated state funding to districts and community-based housing organizations; and required OSPI and the Department of Commerce, to develop a cross system collaboration to support districts and housing partners in their work to ensure greater stability for students within their schools and communities.[24]

It is important to note that while this is one act intended to improve outcomes for students experiencing homelessness, there are two separate funding streams that are intended to work in tandem to promote educational stability and housing stability. The Homeless Student Stability Education Program (HSSEP), managed by OSPI, awards competitive grants to school districts to provide educational supports for students experiencing homelessness. The Homeless Student Stability Program (HSSP), managed by the OHY within the Department of Commerce, awards competitive grants to community-based organizations to provide housing support for students experiencing homelessness.

During the 2023 legislative session, the legislature awarded OSPI a one-time increase in funding for FY24 and FY25, from $1.2 million annually to $2.5 million; and awarded OHY an ongoing increase in funding for FY24 and FY25, from $1.2 million annually to $2 million.[25]

With these increases:

1. OSPI was able to increase the number of districts receiving HSSEP from 17 in FY23, to 49 in FY24, and 42 in FY25.
2. OHY was able to increase the number of community-based organizations receiving HSSP from 5 in FY23, to 14 in FY24, and 12 in FY25.

**Figure 7: HSSEP Number of Beneficiaries Per Fiscal Year (e.g. School Districts, Schools, Students, Educators, and Other)**

| Fiscal Year | Number of Beneficiaries |
|---|---|
| 2024 | 13,316 |
| 2023 | 4,267 |
| 2022 | 3,500 |
| 2021 | 2,678 |
| 2020 | 12 |

Source: OSPI Proviso Reports. *BA, BB 522(4)(b) Homeless Students.* Pg.4

[24] HB 1682.S3.PL (2015), HB 5324 (2019). HB 1622.PL (2023)
[25] ESSB 5187 (2023)

During FY24, districts receiving HSSEP across Washington state represented eight of nine education service districts and 20 of 39 counties; and the number of students served through HSSEP increased from 4,250 students in FY23 to 13,267 students in FY24 and 16,403 students in FY25. In addition, the number of grant recipients with community partners that received HSSP funding from Commerce increased from 17.6% in FY23 to 42.8% in FY24.[26] Also, in FY24, community-based organizations using HSSP funds, were able to provide housing assistance to 3,035 individual clients experiencing homelessness.[27] These increased services resulted in improved housing and educational stability for students, with districts reporting that students obtaining permanent housing increased from 1,837 students in FY23, to 3,423 in FY24, and to 3,083 in FY25.

In HSSEP End of Year reports for FY24, districts reported improvement in the following areas:[28]

- Training delivery for school district staff and community partners,
- Better access to basic needs, mental health supports and referrals for other support services,
- Greater ability to coordinate transportation for highly mobile students,
- Improved ability to help students and families obtain stable housing,
- Increased attendance,
- Improved academic performance,
- Increased high school graduation rates.

As is evidenced by the outcomes noted above, continued funding for both districts and housing providers is essential in ensuring our most vulnerable students have educational access, housing support, academic assistance, transportation, appropriate referrals and access to resources to meet their basic needs. This grant has been very effective in improving identification and support for students, which is demonstrated by the increased requests for funding. During the most recent application period, OSPI received 71 completed applications with strong program proposals requesting a total of $4,294,038; however, we were only able to fund 32 districts with a total of $890,000.

The PEI workgroup recommends the following:

1. Ensure the current level of funding, $1.2 million, in HSSEP funding to school districts is restored for the 2026–2027 school year. Optimally, return funding to the level funded of $2.5 million in the 2023 legislative session.
    a. During the 2025 legislative session, due to a significant budget deficit, the HSSEP funding returned to $1.2 million for the 2025–2026 school year and was completely eliminated for the 2026–2027 school year. This was despite the significant positive

[26] OSPI Proviso Reports. BA, BB 522(4)(b) Homeless Students. Pg.6
[27] OSPI Proviso Reports. *BA, BB 522(4)(b) Homeless Students.* Pg.6
[28] OSPI Proviso Reports. *BA, BB 522(4)(b) Homeless Students*.

outcomes demonstrated by districts and the tremendous increase in the number of students served.[29]

2. Maintain the current $2 million annual funding level for HSSP for community-based organizations.
    a. HSSP funds are currently one of the sole sources of funding available to provide housing support to students who are homeless according to the McKinney-Vento Act. Most housing funds can only serve those individuals that meet the HUD definition of homelessness, and do not include those students who are doubled up and couch surfing due to a loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason.[30]
3. Create a State Act that mirrors the language of the McKinney-Vento Act and includes a requirement for comprehensive training for all staff, administrators, and school board members on the rights and provisions for students experiencing homelessness.
    a. Educators, school staff, and community partners require ongoing professional development to understand the scope of homelessness within their communities, and the rights and provisions afforded to students experiencing homelessness under federal and state law. Comprehensive training equips stakeholders to identify eligible students, implement supportive practices, develop adequate resources, and advocate effectively. This recommendation prioritizes annual workshops, community presentations, and access to professional development for educators and community partners.

## Postsecondary

In Fall 2024, students at 46 colleges and universities across Washington state participated in a survey administered by Western Washington University in partnership with the WASC. "Students who reported experiencing homelessness or foster care in high school experienced the highest rates of basic needs insecurity among all subpopulations. Former homeless youth experienced insecurity at a rate of 88.4%, which is 36.0 percentage points higher than the overall rate. Former foster youth experienced insecurity at a rate of 84.4%, which is 32.0 percentage points higher than the overall rate."[31]

Findings from the survey indicated that more than half of the students pursuing postsecondary education experience either housing or food insecurity, with 11.1% experiencing homelessness in the last 12 months.[32]

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[29] ESSB 5167 (2025)

[30] *https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ecd/homelessness_definition.pdf › ... › ecd › homelessness_definition.pdf*

[31] Washington Student Achievement Council. *Reassessing Basic Needs Security Among Washington College Students*. (January 2025) Pg. 9

[32] Washington Student Achievement Council. *Reassessing Basic Needs Security Among Washington College Students*. (January 2025) Pg.7.

These findings, along with postsecondary enrollment and persistence data from ERDC,[33] are indicative of why it is so challenging for students experiencing homelessness to pursue higher education and complete their degree.

A recent study from the Sound Reengagement Collaborative region, which includes all of Pierce County, South King County, and Bellevue City revealed that:

- Of the 22,805 young folks (16-24) in the region that are disconnected from work and school, over two-thirds have a secondary credential (High School/GED), but do not have a postsecondary credential.
- Looking at this group of students (16–24 with a secondary credential but no postsecondary credential) 31% are disconnected from work and school. This number rises to 41% when looking only at Pierce County.

The Northwest Education Access team finds these numbers to be staggering examples that education strategies cannot end with a secondary credential and must extend through postsecondary.[34]

However, the rising costs to cover basic needs beyond tuition,[35] and the uncertainty of future federal funding for postsecondary education, make it very difficult for students experiencing homelessness, especially those students who are Unaccompanied Youth experiencing homelessness, to pursue a postsecondary credential.

One student who participated in the Washington Postsecondary Basic Needs Survey commented, "Pursuing higher education is challenging enough, but dealing with food insecurity and housing instability makes the journey even tougher. These basic needs become constant distractions, making it hard to focus on school. I often find myself sitting in class thinking about how I'm going to make ends meet, whether I'll have enough money for food, or how I'll pay rent."[36]

The Washington state legislature enacted the Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness (SSEH) pilot to improve support for postsecondary students experiencing homelessness and former foster youth in State Bill (SB) 5800 (2019). The program was expanded and eventually made permanent in State Bill (SB) 5802 (2023). SSEH now serves nearly 5000 students annually across the 34 community and technical colleges and the six public baccalaureate institutions. The 2025 legislature expanded the program to include the state's tribal college in State Bill (SB) 5304 (2025). The program would benefit from increased investment to address growing student caseload and inflation of rent and staffing costs. At a minimum, continuation of the current level of state funding should be maintained to avoid

[33] Appendix A. Tables 5-1 and 5-2.
[34] Sound Reengagement Collaborative and Equal Access. *SRC Opportunity youth Data Summary 2025.*
[35] Washington Student Achievement Council. Magisos, Ami. *Reassuring Basic Needs Security Among Washington College Students*. Pg.5, pg. 6.
[36] Western Washington University in partnership with the Washington Student Achievement Council. *2024 Washington Student Experience Survey: Executive Summary.*

creating a new gap in support that is contributing to successful postsecondary attainment for many Washington students. Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness Program - Annual Report to the Legislature, December 1, 2024 (WSAC/SBCTC)

In 2019, the Passport to Careers program (which offers education, mentorship and resources for career readiness, helping students transition successfully into adulthood), was expanded to include Unaccompanied Youth experiencing homelessness. This program, administered by WSAC, allows students who are both unaccompanied and experiencing homelessness to access scholarship funding and student support for post-secondary education and apprenticeships.

In the 2025 legislative session, due to the budget deficit, the Passport to Careers Program's request for maintenance funding was denied, resulting in a 60% cut to student scholarships. These programs have contributed to significant progress across the state and further cuts would significantly impact the work of achieving parity between students experiencing homelessness and their housed peers.

The PEI workgroup recommends the following:

1. At a minimum, maintain the state's current level of investment in Passport to Careers. Optimally, increase the investment to allow WSAC to return to the original level of scholarship ($5,000 per student) for all Passport eligible students.
2. Implement the recommendations put forward by the PEI Foster Care Subcommittee and include Unaccompanied Youth experiencing homelessness in that eligibility as appropriate. (pages 20–23)

## Students Experiencing Juvenile Justice Recommendations

The following report recommendations regarding students experiencing juvenile justice are informed by a report from a youth advisory group meeting conducted by the DCYF which included feedback from students from the state's two long-term juvenile facilities and two of the eight community facilities. In addition, the recommendations were informed by the 2022 OSPI and DCYF joint Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 1295 (ESHB 1295) (2021) report to the legislature. These recommendations reflect the intersection of youth voice gathered through DCYF's youth survey and the collaborative efforts of education partners outlined in the ESHB 1295 legislative report, advancing the priorities of this subcommittee.

Students expressed a strong desire for educational opportunities, viewing education as a path to empowerment.[37] However, these same students reported several barriers to meaningful engagement: a lack of trauma-informed practice among educators, insufficient staffing, a lack of shared lived experiences between educators and students, and curriculum that felt disconnected from their lives. These concerns suggest that while students in institutional education programs value education, they

[37] Western Washington University in partnership with the Washington Student Achievement Council. *2024 Washington Student Experience Survey: Executive Summary*.

often feel disconnected from the system intended to serve them. This reinforces the importance of the ESHB 1295 legislative report's recommendations to provide trauma-informed and social-emotional learning training for institutional education (IE) educators and implementing mastery-based learning across all IE settings to increase engagement and support student-centered environments.

The PEI Juvenile Justice Subcommittee recommends all agencies and organizations supporting the education of students in juvenile justice facilities work collaboratively to increase the engagement of students in their learning.

Specifically, this subcommittee framed needed action at three levels:

a. Governance level: state or county policies and practices to remove barriers to classroom attendance.
b. Facility level: recruitment and training practices for educators and community partners working directly with students in juvenile justice facilities.
c. Instructional level: teaching materials and curriculum used with students in juvenile justice facilities.

The following recommendations are aligned with relevant data, current research, and, in some cases, state policies.

## Governance Level

Washington must not only provide for the safety and overall well-being of youth in the state's care but ensure that these youth succeed educationally. Quality education and skills-building are associated with positive reentry outcomes for justice-system-involved youth.[38] There is a body of research suggesting students enrolled in institutional education programs enter facilities with lower levels of participation in school than their peers who are not involved with juvenile justice.[39] For example, students entering institutional education programs are less likely to be enrolled in school, more likely to be truant or have high levels of absenteeism, more likely to have repeated at least one grade, and more likely to have been suspended or expelled from school. Given the educational obstacles students face prior to entering institutional education, the priority of all institutional education programs should be providing educational services to students with the goal of supporting students' reentry into their community schools.[40]

Currently, there is no public data on the number of days a student misses scheduled classes; however, there is public-facing information, such as a relatively recent Seattle Times article which cites

[38] Upton, F. (2023). Addressing challenges and opportunities in juvenile justice: Meeting the needs of incarcerated adolescent populations. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 24(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/15291006231218669
[39] Development Services Group, Inc. (2019). Education for Youth Under Formal Supervision of the Juvenile Justice System. Literature Review. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justic and Delinquency Prevention. https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/litreviews/Education-for-Youth-in-the-Juvenile-Justice-System.pdf
[40] U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice. (2014, December). *Guiding Principles for Providing High-Quality Education in Juvenile Justice Secure Care Settings.* Washington, D.C. https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/policy/gen/guid/correctional-education/guiding-principles.pdf

challenges with staffing shortages, fights among incarcerated young people, food insecurity, and 22-hour long lockdowns in residents' rooms.[41] Safety concerns and frequent student movement in the DCYF JR large facilities, often tied to limited DCYF JR facility staffing, causes interruption of classroom instruction, and reduces consistency and continuity in learning. Many times, security concerns and limited staffing leads to full-facility exclusions, which result in the cancellation of all classes (lock down). These interruptions undermine the ability for students to make academic progress and work in a stable learning environment. Additionally, instructional staff are not consistently trained in the same safety protocols as DCYF Juvenile Rehabilitation (JR) or juvenile detention center (JDC) personnel, creating operational gaps during student transitions between cottages, units, or pods. These movements, often necessary for safety reasons, can lead to the exclusion of individual students from educational programming.

To better understand and address these issues, PEI recommends that responsible agencies require all juvenile justice facilities to track and publicly report aggregate data on the number of hours of education each student misses, disaggregated by facility and by reason for each absence. This data should be anonymized and include information about school or classroom cancellations. Collecting and sharing this information can help identify trends and support efforts to improve student success. Facilities included in this recommendation are long-term institutions run by DCYF, county-run JDCs, and adult jails serving young adults with rights to K–12 education. In future years, the subcommittee will look at recommendations related to collecting and reporting absences within IE programs.

The PEI workgroup recommends the following:

Responsible state, county, and local agencies should require all juvenile justice facilities serving youth and young adults with rights to K–12 education to track and publicly report how many students in juvenile justice facilities miss scheduled classes or school days and the reasons for these absences or school closures.

## Facility Level

Students also expressed a desire for access to educators who share their lived experiences and have undergone cultural awareness training. Research supports and expands on these student requests, highlighting the importance of addressing mismatched backgrounds between educators and students,

[41] Girgis, L. (2025, March 17). WA lawmakers amin to relieve strained juvenile legal system. *Seattle Times*. https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/wa-lawmakers-aim-to-relieve-strained-juvenile-justice-system/

[42, 43] antagonistic relationships between students and educators,[44] and the need for additional training, particularly in cultural awareness, to better meet student needs.

Strategies to recruit staff with lived experience and employing culturally responsive hiring practices are essential to address student needs. Data from the OSPI highlights key demographic gaps within institutional education programs. For instance, during the 2024–2025 school year at Green Hill, 82.2% of students identified as a race or ethnicity other than white, while 81.0% of educators identified as white.[45] To increase student engagement and better meet their needs, it is critical to implement hiring practices that prioritize lived experience. These disparities underscore the importance of comprehensive hiring practices and training focused on cultural responsiveness.

Educators in juvenile-justice facilities need professional development opportunities that help them build cultural competencies. These trainings should be trauma informed and address specialized supports such as special education identification and evaluation. The U.S. Department of Education in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Justice recommends that institutional education programs "provide or otherwise facilitate access to professional development opportunities for education staff so they can develop skills to address the unique needs of students in juvenile settings more effectively". Such a recommendation was echoed by a recent report to the Legislature published by the OSPI and the DCYF which included an action step specific to providing educators with professional development that included "trauma-informed practices and social emotional learning, and culturally and linguistically competent training"[46] Additionally, data points to the need for specialized support, for example, at Echo Glen School in the same school year, 36.4% of students were identified as having disabilities—20 percentage points higher than the statewide average. Data provided by the Education Research Data Center (ERDC) (2019) reinforces this disparity.

The PEI workgroup recommends the following:

1. Educators in juvenile justice facilities must have access to professional development that is:
    a. Designed to develop cultural competencies, including sovereignty-centered training.
    b. Includes components of special education identification, evaluation and support.
    c. Based on trauma-informed practices.

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[42] Brenner, G. J., Zeng, S., Armstrong, A. L., Anderson, C., Carpenter, E. (2016, December). *Strengthening education in short-term juvenile detention centers: Final technical report.* Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention: Washington, DC. https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/library/publications/strengthening-education-short-term-juvenile-detention-centers-final-technical

[43] Gagnon, J. C., Houchins, D. E., Murphy, K. M. (2012, November). Current juvenile corrections professional development practices and future directions. *Teacher Education and Special Education v35, n4, p333-344.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406411434602

[44] Annamma S. A., Cabral, B., Harvey, B., Wilmot, J. M., Le, A., Morgan J. (2024, February). "When we come to your class…We feel not like we're in prison": Resisting prison-school's dehumanizing and (de)socializing mechanism through abolitionist praxis. *American Education Research Journal*, 61(4), 3-47. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312231198236

[45] Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (2025, August 20). *Report Card*. https://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/101855

[46] Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction & Washington State Department of Children Youth and Families (2022, December 1). *Improving Institutional Education Outcomes: Final Report.* Olympia, WA. https://ospi.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/2023-08/12-22-improving-institutional-education-outcomes-final-report.pdf

    d. OSPI should develop guidance for IE education providers on design components for selecting culturally responsive professional development opportunities.
2. IE programs in collaboration with facility providers, should be required to develop actionable plans to expand students' access to educators and vetted community partners with shared lived experience.
    a. These plans should include intentional strategies to cultivate a diverse educator workforce that reflects the identities of students served, for example, strengthening Native educator cultivation so justice-involved Native youth see their identities reflected and valued. The vetting processes for community partners should include youth participation.

## Instructional Level

A high-quality, and culturally responsive curriculum is essential to the educational success of students in juvenile justice facilities. These students must have access to a curriculum that is engaging, and appropriate to each student's age, grade, placement, development, and culture (see Footnote 23). Given the complex needs of this population, the curriculum must extend beyond basic math and English language arts to include social emotional learning and career and technical skill-building opportunities[47] with real-world applications.[48] In meeting these needs, the curriculum must also be trauma-informed, affirm students' identities, and align with their interests and career goals.

It is essential that students in juvenile justice settings remain connected to the broad, diverse, and engaging curriculum offered by their local school districts as much as possible. Providing opportunities for students to stay linked to their school of origin helps maintain educational consistency and strengthens their chances of successful reintegration back to their local school. Curricular resources provided by institutional education programs should be reviewed to ensure students are treated first and foremost as learners with futures worthy of investment. Research underscores that when classrooms feel less like prisons and more like genuine learning spaces, students are more engaged and less dehumanized and youth report feeling hope and belonging when their education affirms their identities.

Trauma-informed curricula further support this by improving emotional regulation, reducing behavioral incidents, and increasing engagement.[49] At the same time, successful programs point to the need for career-connected learning. Workforce development initiatives that align with student interests and real labor market opportunities increase job placement, retention, and self-efficacy, while

[47] Osher, D., Penkoff, C., Sidana, A., & Kelly, P. (2016). *Improving conditions for learning for youth who are neglected or delinquent: Second edition.* Washington, DC: The National Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Neglected or Delinquent Children & Youth. https://neglected-delinquent.ed.gov/sites/default/files/NDTAC-ImprovingConditionsForLearning-IssueBrief.pdf

[48] Domenici, D. & Holland, K. (2021, August 31). NDTAC Brief- Promising uses of at-risk funding: Focus on engagement, relevance, and meaning. Washington, DC: The National Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Neglected or Delinquent Children & Youth. https://cdn.ndtac.net/2021-Brief-UsesOfAtRiskFunding.pdf

[49] Malvaso, C.G., Day, A., & Boyd, C.M. (2024). The outcomes of trauma-informed practice in youth justice: An umbrella review. *Journal of Childhood & Adolescent Trauma, 17*, 939-955. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-024-00634-5

also lowering recidivism.[50] Other research reinforces this, finding that robust educational and vocational training within institutions helps youth with their personal development and strengthens their prospects of successful reintegration to their communities (see Footnote 21). Curricula that connect education to real careers, especially those aligned with students' interests, can increase a student's confidence, and reduce the chances of reoffending.

To build on these curricular approaches, Mastery-Based Learning (MBL) offers an instructional model that fosters a more individualized and relevant learning experience that recognizes each student's unique background and needs. In addition to MBL, Mastery-based Crediting (MBC), offers students the opportunity for to earn high school credit for performance on district-specified assessments that are clearly aligned to learning standards.[51] A recommendation was included in the ESHB 1295 legislative report for institutional education programs to "develop a written plan for implementing MBL in collaboration with the State Board of Education". MBL promotes student agency by allowing learners to make decisions about their own learning experiences and progress based on evidence of mastery, not seat time. This approach not only differentiates instruction, but also encourages inclusivity, acknowledging the diverse experiences and cultures of students.[52] The Profile of a Graduate, developed by the MBL Work Group, emphasizes the need for multidisciplinary skills that reflect the values and perspectives of students and their families.[53] Together, MBL and MBC offer learning and crediting opportunities that honor student agency, cultural identity, and individual learning needs while ensuring students earn meaningful credit that supports their academic advancement. For more details on Washington state's definition and implementation of MBL and MBC, see the guidance provided by the **State Board of Education**.

Together, this research demonstrates that curricular resources for students in juvenile justice facilities must be research-aligned, trauma-informed, and future-oriented—ensuring students are not defined by their incarceration but empowered to build meaningful lives beyond it.

The PEI workgroup recommends the following:

1. OSPI should survey all institutional education programs in juvenile justice facilities regarding available curriculums and develop a public-facing resource for understanding the landscape of curricular resources.
2. IE providers in juvenile-justice facilities should have access to mastery-based learning trainings and resources. Providers must also develop relevant and robust mastery-based academic pathways that are aligned to students' personal goals for career and postsecondary education.

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[50] Davis, L.M., Bozick, R., Steele, J. L., Saunders, J., Miles, J. N. V. (2013, August 22). *Evaluating the effectiveness of correctional education: A meta-analysis of programs that provide education to incarcerated adults.* Washington, DC: RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html

[51] WAC 180-51-05

[52] Washington State Board of Education. (n.d.). Mastery-based learning in Washington state. Olympia, WA. https://sbe.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-08/2022%20MBL%20OnePage2.ac.pdf

[53] Washington State Board of Education. (2021, August). *Profile of a graduate in Washington state: A report on student and family perspectives, August 2021.* Olympia, WA. https://sbe.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-08/Student-Family%20Perspectives%20Report--Final%20FINAL.pdf

3. School districts and Education Service Districts that provide education services in juvenile justice facilities must ensure that students have access to materials that are:

    a. Research aligned.
    b. Based on best practices.
    c. Trauma informed.
    d. Reflective of students lived experiences.
    e. Applicable to their interests.
    f. Aligned to high-demand employment fields and work force development.

# CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

The work of the PEI work group continues until the summer of 2028. During that time, thousands of students who have experienced foster care, homelessness, or juvenile justice will have exited high school to take their first steps toward their postsecondary aspirations. The education system will have successfully supported some of those students, it will have failed others. Some students will succeed because of the education they receive; others will succeed in spite of it. Some students will not find success at all.

It is critical that the state of Washington undertake the strenuous and serious work of providing equitable resources to serve the PEI student groups. PEI will continue to evaluate the progress of achieving parity with hopes that next year all gaps have narrowed. The workgroup will monitor which recommendations were picked up and implemented and those that have languished with the intention of refining and elevating in the coming year. The workgroup will remain committed to supporting students experiencing foster care, homelessness, and juvenile justice in reaching their goals.

# APPENDICES

## Appendix A and B:

For information regarding the ERDC data visit https://erdc.wa.gov/publications-and-reports/long-term-education-outcomes-foster-care-homelessness-institutional-education-2025.

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