



# Funding the Whatcom County Skills Center Core Campus

## 2027-29 Biennial Capital Budget Decision Package

**Agency:** 3500 Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

**Budget period:** 2027-29 Biennial Budget

**Budget level:** PL

## PROJECT SUMMARY

The Meridian School District requests \$1.3 million to fund the pre-design of a new Whatcom County Skills Center (WCSC) Core Campus in Bellingham. The proposed facility is estimated at 53,440 gross square feet supporting the regional workforce education to serve students throughout Northwest Washington. The project will establish the first permanent comprehensive regional skills center in Whatcom County and create specialized instructional environments that support career connected learning, workforce preparation, industry certifications and postsecondary pathways. If the pre-design phase for \$1.3 million is funded in the 2027-29 biennium capital budget, the Meridian School District will submit the construction phase budget request of \$69.3 million for funding in the 2029-31 biennium capital budget. The total project cost estimate is \$70.6 million.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This project represents the pre-design and construction phases of the WCSC Core Campus, a new regional workforce education facility at approximately 53,440 gross square feet located on the Guide Meridian corridor in Bellingham. The total project cost estimate is \$70.6 million with the pre-design phase requesting \$1.3 million for the 2027-29 biennium and construction phase requesting \$69.3 million for the 2029-31 biennium if the pre-design phase is funded.

The \$1.3 million in funding for pre-design includes activities such as feasibility studies, educational and program specifications, and other early planning efforts. It also encompasses schematic design, including preliminary work related to code compliance, agency approvals, and construction planning. During this phase, the architect and engineering team, working with the host district and local agencies, develops a project description that identifies alternatives, conceptual site and floor plans, high-performance building features, preliminary systems and materials, project schedules, and initial construction cost estimates.

The construction phase is anticipated to begin in July 2029 following completion of preconstruction activities and be substantially complete by late 2030 with occupancy in early 2031 and is estimated at a cost of \$69.3 million. The project has been planned as a phased implementation strategy. Preliminary workforce programming is already underway through existing partnerships and satellite program opportunities, providing workforce education experiences while the permanent facility advances through planning and construction. Upon completion, the facility will support a dual-session instructional model serving approximately

384 students during the morning session and approximately 384 students during the afternoon session, providing access for approximately 768 students and supporting approximately 415 FTE annually across seven school districts in Northwest Washington.

### **What will the request produce or construct? Who or what will be impacted by the budget request and how will they be impacted?**

This request is for pre-design activities for a new WCSC Core Campus estimated at \$1.3 million. The activities include design development, permitting and project preparation, and are anticipated to begin in Fiscal Year 2028. If the pre-design phase is funded in the 2027-29 biennium capital budget, the Meridian School District will submit the construction phase budget request for \$69.3 million in the 2029-31 biennium capital budget. Construction is anticipated to begin in Fiscal Year 2030 with substantial completion and occupancy anticipated during Fiscal Year 2031. The current total project estimate is approximately \$70.6 million.

The new WCSC Core Campus is approximately 53,440 gross square feet, a regional workforce education facility serving students throughout Northwest Washington. The project will establish the first permanent comprehensive regional skills center in Whatcom County and create specialized instructional environments that support career connected learning, workforce preparation, industry certifications and postsecondary pathways.

The project estimate reflects the specialized nature of workforce education facilities, including healthcare simulation laboratories, technical training environments, welding and fabrication spaces, automotive and diesel laboratories, HVAC instructional facilities and other industry standard learning environments necessary to support high demand workforce pathways. Upon completion, the facility will support a dual-session instructional model serving approximately 384 students during the morning session and approximately 384 students during the afternoon session, providing access for approximately 768 students and supporting approximately 415 FTE annually across seven school districts in Northwest Washington.

The facility will include instructional and laboratory spaces supporting sixteen workforce pathways, including Automotive Technician and Electric Vehicle Systems, Aviation, Biomedical Laboratory Science, Culinary Arts and Hospitality, Diesel Technology with CDL, Early Childhood Education, Fire Science and EMS, HVAC+R, Maritime, Medical Assisting Careers, Pre-Nursing, Pre-Pharmacy Technician, Pre-Physical Therapy, Radiology Technician, Sterile Processing Technician and Welding. The project also includes healthcare simulation laboratories, biomedical science instructional spaces, welding and fabrication shops, automotive and diesel training facilities, HVAC laboratories, aviation and maritime instructional environments, culinary laboratories, early childhood education learning spaces, student support areas and associated site development and infrastructure.

### **Identify the problem or opportunity addressed by this request. Why is the request a priority? What would be the result of not acting?**

The WCSC Core Campus addresses a longstanding gap in access to comprehensive workforce education opportunities throughout Northwest Washington. While students in many regions of

Washington benefit from permanent regional skills center facilities, Whatcom County remains one of the largest areas in the state without a dedicated comprehensive skills center campus.

As a result, students across seven participating school districts have limited access to specialized workforce preparation programs, industry certifications, work-based learning opportunities and career connected learning experiences that are available elsewhere in Washington. The project will serve students from Bellingham, Blaine, Ferndale, Lynden, Meridian, Mount Baker and Nooksack Valley School Districts – as well as some Skagit County School Districts. Many students reside in rural and geographically isolated communities where access to specialized workforce education programs is limited by transportation challenges, facility availability and program capacity. The WCSC Core Campus will expand educational opportunities for students regardless of their home district and increase access to high demand career pathways aligned with regional workforce needs.

This request is a priority because employers throughout Northwest Washington continue to experience workforce shortages across healthcare, skilled trades, transportation, maritime industries, aviation, public safety, hospitality and early childhood education. The proposed facility will provide sixteen workforce pathways intentionally aligned with occupations identified as high demand and very high demand within Washington State. By strengthening workforce preparation opportunities while students are still in high school, the project supports both student success and regional economic vitality.

The project will create approximately 53,440 gross square feet of specialized workforce education space and will support a dual-session instructional model capable of serving approximately 768 students daily and approximately 415 FTE annually.

Without state funding, students in Northwest Washington will continue to have limited access to comprehensive workforce education opportunities and regional employers will continue to face workforce shortages in critical industries. The WCSC Core Campus creates entirely new educational capacity for Northwest Washington and represents a strategic investment in workforce development, educational opportunity and long-term economic growth.

**For new funding requests for programs or projects that have received previous appropriations (either a phase of construction or previous grant rounds), how much has been spent or put under contract?**

N/A

**Does this project or program leverage non-state funding? If yes, how much by source?**

Yes. Meridian School District has committed approximately 7.2 acres of land toward development of the WCSC Core Campus. The estimated value of this local contribution is approximately \$740,000. Additional local investments include planning activities, consortium governance support, workforce partnership development and implementation of preliminary workforce programs prior to completion of the permanent facility. The project also leverages

extensive partnerships with regional employers, healthcare providers, post-secondary institutions and workforce development organizations that will support internships, work-based learning, dual credit opportunities and industry certification pathways.

**For major construction projects, describe the viable alternative solutions you considered. Why was this alternative chosen?**

Multiple alternatives were explored throughout project planning and feasibility development. The consortium considered continuing to operate only satellite and shared facility programs. While this approach provides limited access to workforce education opportunities, existing facilities lack the capacity, specialized equipment and instructional environments necessary to support comprehensive regional workforce programming.

The consortium also evaluated expansion of individual district programs. This approach would result in duplication of specialized facilities and equipment while limiting student access and reducing operational efficiency. The recommended alternative is construction of a centralized regional skills center campus. This model maximizes utilization of specialized instructional spaces, expands student access across district boundaries and creates a sustainable regional workforce development system aligned with documented labor market demand. The project will also benefit employers, post-secondary institutions and community organizations throughout Northwest Washington by strengthening workforce pipelines in healthcare, transportation, skilled trades, aviation, maritime industries, public safety, hospitality and early childhood education sectors.

**For major construction projects, what project delivery method has been or will be selected and why?**

The delivery method will be determined during the pre-construction phase of the proposed project.

**Location**

- Address: Guide Meridian
- Zip Code 98226
- County: Whatcom
- City: Bellingham
- Legislative District: 42

**Grant recipient organization**

Meridian School District.

**RCW that establishes grant**

28A.525

**Application process used**

N/A

## **Describe the Growth Management Impacts**

The proposed WCSC Core Campus is located in unincorporated Whatcom County within the Guide Meridian corridor and has been incorporated into long-range planning for the regional skills center. Meridian School District has secured the project site and addressed local planning considerations throughout development.

Intended to serve students from across Northwest Washington, the project supports regional education, workforce development, and economic objectives. As a public educational facility, it is expected to comply with local land-use and growth-management requirements. Future development will include coordination with Whatcom County and other applicable agencies on permitting, transportation access, utilities, infrastructure, and environmental review.

The project is not anticipated to create significant adverse growth-management impacts. Instead, it will provide a regional educational resource that supports workforce preparation, expands educational opportunities, and strengthens the local and regional economy. By preparing students for high-demand careers in healthcare, skilled trades, transportation, aviation, maritime industries, public safety, hospitality, and early childhood education, the campus will contribute to the long-term workforce needs of Northwest Washington.

## **Funding Requested**

- 2027-29 \$1,294,000
- 2029-31 \$69,301,000
- 2031-33 \$0
- 2033-35 \$0
- 2035-37 \$0

## **STRATEGIC AND PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES**

**Provide context on how this request fits into the agency's work. Describe how this project supports the agency's strategic plan or would improve agency performance.**

This project supports Superintendent Reykdal's K-12 Education Vision of his goal for Washington's public education system to prepare every student who walks through our school doors for post-secondary aspirations, careers, and life.

**How is your proposal impacting equity in the state? Which communities are impacted by this proposal? What are the measurable outcomes that would result from the project?**

The WCSC Core Campus advances educational equity by expanding access to high-quality career-connected learning opportunities for students who currently have limited access to specialized education programs. The project serves students across seven school districts, including Bellingham, Blaine, Ferndale, Lynden, Meridian, Mount Baker and Nooksack Valley School Districts. Together, these districts represent urban, suburban and rural communities

across Northwest Washington. Many students within the consortium reside in geographically isolated communities where access to specialized career and technical education programs is limited by transportation challenges, facility availability, and program capacity. Because Whatcom County does not currently have a permanent comprehensive regional skills center, students in the region do not have the same level of access to workforce preparation programs available to students in many other parts of Washington. The proposed WCSC Core Campus helps address this geographic disparity by creating the first permanent regional skills center facility serving Northwest Washington.

The project will expand access to sixteen workforce pathways aligned with high demand and very high demand occupations in healthcare, skilled trades, transportation, aviation, maritime industries, public safety, hospitality and early childhood education. These pathways provide opportunities for students to earn industry recognized credentials, participate in work-based learning experiences, earn dual credit and prepare for family wage careers and post-secondary education.

The proposal will benefit students from a wide range of demographic backgrounds, including students from low-income households, first generation college-going families, rural communities and students seeking alternatives to traditional four-year college pathways. By expanding access to workforce preparation opportunities and reducing barriers to participation, the project increases educational opportunity and economic mobility for students throughout the region.

The WCSC Core Campus helps address disparities in educational access by ensuring that a student's geographic location does not limit their ability to participate in high-quality workforce education programs. The project creates new educational capacity, expands opportunity and strengthens pathways to post-secondary education, employment and long-term economic success for students across Northwest Washington.

## OTHER SUPPORTING MATERIALS

**If this project is linked to the Puget Sound Action Agenda and/or the Governor's Salmon Strategy, please follow the instructions in Chapter 14 of the operating budget instructions and Chapter 3 of the capital budget instructions.**

This project does not impact the Puget Sound Action Agenda or the Governor's Salmon Strategy.

**Is there additional information you would like decision makers to know when evaluating this request?**

The WCSC Core Campus represents a unique opportunity to expand workforce education access in a region that currently lacks a permanent comprehensive skills center facility. Unlike projects that improve, modernize or expand existing educational capacity, this project creates entirely new access to regional workforce preparation opportunities for students who have historically been underserved by Washington's skills center system.

The project was developed over several years through regional collaboration among seven school districts, workforce partners, post-secondary institutions, healthcare providers, employers, and community organizations. It delivers a workforce development model intentionally aligned with documented labor shortages, regional economic priorities, and student demand.

The proposed facility will serve students from urban, suburban, and rural communities across Northwest Washington and provide access to 16 high-demand workforce pathways supporting healthcare, transportation, skilled trades, aviation, maritime industries, public safety, hospitality, and early childhood education. Designed around an efficient dual-session model, the facility maximizes use of specialized instructional spaces, expands access to approximately 768 students, and supports roughly 415 FTE annually.

The WCSC has completed extensive planning, secured a project site through the Meridian School District, established consortium governance, formed strong regional partnerships, and begun implementing preliminary workforce pathways. The project demonstrates a high level of readiness and strong local and regional commitment. Investment in the WCSC Core Campus would close a longstanding geographic gap in workforce education access and create a permanent regional resource that will serve students, employers, and communities throughout Northwest Washington for decades.