



Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE

UPDATE: Project Education Impact Annual Report 2026

Authorizing Legislation: RCW 28A.300.544

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Project Education Impact (PEI) Workgroup was established by the Washington State Legislature to develop recommendations that advance educational parity for students experiencing foster care, homelessness, and involvement in juvenile justice systems. This group has also been referred to by the Washington State Legislature as “The Students in Foster Care, Experiencing Homelessness, or In or Exiting Juvenile Rehabilitation (JR) Facilities Workgroup.” Under [Revised Code of Washington \(RCW\) 28A.300.544](#), the workgroup is tasked with identifying strategies to eliminate disparities in educational outcomes and reduce racial and ethnic inequities for these student populations. This report represents the first year of a two-year effort focused on understanding the underlying causes of persistent educational disparities and establishing a foundation for future policy recommendations.

In 2026, the PEI Workgroup transitioned from a large stakeholder group to a focused advisory committee and adopted a systems-level approach to its legislative charge. Rather than evaluating individual programs, the committee examined the broader conditions, structures, policies, and cross-system interactions that influence student outcomes. This approach recognizes that students experiencing foster care, homelessness, and juvenile justice involvement often encounter challenges that extend beyond the education system and require coordinated responses across multiple sectors.

A significant accomplishment this year was the development of a longitudinal outcomes dashboard in partnership with the Education Research and Data Center (ERDC). The dashboard provides publicly accessible data on educational and workforce outcomes for students experiencing foster care, homelessness, and juvenile justice, enabling policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders to better understand disparities, monitor progress, and support data-informed decision-making. The dashboard represents an important step toward increased transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement.

To better understand the causes of educational disparities, the advisory committee conducted a structured root cause analysis using the Ishikawa (Fishbone) methodology. Through multiple cross-agency sessions and engagement with youth involved in juvenile justice systems, participants examined the factors contributing to lower educational outcomes for these student populations. The analysis revealed that disparities are driven less by individual student characteristics and more by interconnected systemic conditions.

Nine overarching themes emerged consistently across all analyses:

- Instability and mobility disrupt learning and educational continuity.
- Poverty and unmet basic needs create obstacles to academic success.
- Trauma and mental health challenges affect engagement and achievement.
- Fragmented systems leave students without coordinated supports.
- Educational structures are often not designed for highly mobile students.
- School climate and disciplinary practices can contribute to disengagement.

- Access to resources remains a challenge for students and families.
- Funding and policy constraints hinder sustainable support systems.
- Belonging, engagement, and future opportunities are critical drivers of student success.

These findings point to four fundamental system conditions that contribute to disparities: poverty and instability, trauma and unmet health needs, fragmented systems, and educational structures that fail to adequately include and support highly mobile students. Together, these conditions create cumulative barriers that interrupt learning, reduce engagement, delay support, and perpetuate inequitable outcomes.

The advisory committee also identified several key system drivers contributing to these challenges. These include an overreliance on educational systems to address issues that require broader cross-system responsibility, inequitable access to funding and resources, school environments that struggle to foster belonging and engagement, and fragmented governance and accountability structures. The committee concluded that while program-specific improvements may provide short-term gains, lasting progress will require comprehensive systems-level reforms that align policies, funding, accountability, and service delivery across agencies.

Looking ahead, the committee's work will shift from identifying root causes to developing solutions. During year two, the advisory committee will focus on identifying effective practices, examining gaps and duplication across systems, and developing policy and implementation recommendations that strengthen coordination, clarify responsibilities, improve accountability, and support continuous evaluation. The ultimate goal is to create a more integrated, equitable, and sustainable statewide system that improves educational outcomes for students experiencing foster care, homelessness, and juvenile justice while advancing the Legislature's vision of educational parity by 2028.

INTRODUCTION

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 many similar characteristics, such as higher-than-average rates of school transfers and lower-than-average high school and postsecondary 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 CHARGE

[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 [RCW 28A.300.544 \(2\)](#), PEI shall develop recommendations to promote the following for students who are in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or in or exiting juvenile justice facilities:

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

This annual report is required by [RCW 28A.300.544 \(4\)](#), with a final report due to the legislature by July 31, 2028.

WORKGROUP COMPOSITION

In January 2026, workgroup members were surveyed to determine the most effective path forward in fulfilling its legislative charge. The survey was designed to gauge member capacity, desired level of involvement, and preferences related to workgroup structure. This information was used to guide decisions about how best to organize workgroup efforts.

It was determined that as the workgroup enters the final two years of their legislative charge, efforts will shift more intentionally toward a systems-level analysis. Specifically, the workgroup intends to articulate a clear picture of:

- Where and why educational disruptions occur across systems.
- How policies, funding structures, and accountability gaps contribute to inequitable outcomes.
- Where roles and responsibilities are unclear or misaligned across agencies.
- Which barriers are shared across student populations, and which are unique.

This phase of the work requires a step back from individual programs and initiatives to an examination of the structures, conditions, and cross-system dynamics that shape outcomes for these student groups. This system-level perspective will be essential to ensuring final recommendations are aligned with the scope and intent of the workgroup's charge and are positioned to have lasting impact.

Following these discussions, workgroup members self-selected¹ participation in one or more of the following pathways:

Short-Term Idea Generation Group:

- Train the trainer session held with the opportunity to host Root Cause Analysis sessions.
- Three virtual sessions hosted by Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) two hours each (Spring and Summer 2026) and two youth focused sessions.
- Focus: Identifying system-level causes, gaps, and leverage points.

PEI Workgroup:

- Three-hour virtual meetings a month (March-September 2026).
- Representative from all agencies and organizations named in authorizing legislation.
- Focus: synthesizing findings and presenting system-level themes and recommendations.

Interested Parties:

- A newsletter was launched to ensure all interested parties could stay updated on the workgroup's efforts.
- Members opted into the list serve and receive periodic updates throughout the year.

¹ See Appendix A

- Focus: To keep a wider stakeholder group informed of the committee's progress and identify opportunities for additional participation.

The workgroup developed a two-year work plan focused on identifying the factors contributing to educational disparities among students experiencing foster care, homelessness, or involvement in the juvenile justice system and recommending strategies to address them.

Year 1: Identify and analyze the barriers and root causes contributing to disparate educational outcomes for these students as compared to the general student population.

Year 2: Develop and describe potential solutions, strategies, and policy recommendations to address the root causes identified in this report. Additionally, the group will seek to elevate areas of excellence around the state where programs, policies, and practices have led to better education outcomes for these student groups.

DATA

Student Group Definitions

The Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) supports the PEI Workgroup efforts 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. PEI along with ERDC defined each student group.

- Students in Foster Care: Youth who were in the placement and care authority as identified through the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) records, age 3–21 from the 2012–2025 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 2012–2025 school years.
- Students Experiencing Institutional Education in juvenile justice facilities: 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 2012–2025 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. ERDC data is inclusive of data for students residing in habilitation centers. Per legislative directive, the recommendations in this report are focused only on students in juvenile justice facilities.

Data Dashboard Development

As a part of the PEI Collaboration, ERDC developed a Data Dashboard which displays long-term education and workforce outcomes for students who experience foster care, homelessness, and institutional education. The measures used in this dashboard were developed in collaboration with the PEI Workgroup to meet requirements under [RCW 28A.300.544](#). The PEI Workgroup reviewed and approved all definitions, calculations and how information is displayed. The dashboard groups students based on their first year of kindergarten and 8th grade and follows them over time. This allows for reporting on outcomes throughout the students' PreK–12 career and beyond.

The development of this dashboard marks a major milestone toward addressing the parity gap for these vulnerable student groups. It provides accessible information to identify disparities, monitor progress over time, and drive informed decision-making. In time, it has the potential to increase transparency and accountability, allowing stakeholders to inform programs, interventions, and investments designed to support student success.

Data Sources

The data used is sourced from the ERDC Preschool to Grade 20 to Workforce (P20W) data warehouse. This data warehouse links administrative records from several contributing education state agencies. Data sources for this dashboard include:

- OSPI: Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS) - For data on enrollment, student characteristics and K–12 program participation. Education Data System (EDS) - For school directory information.
- Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) - For data on high school completion and postsecondary credentials awarded at a Washington public CTC.
- Public Centralized Higher Education Enrollment System (PCHEES) housed at the Office of Financial Management (OFM) - For data on postsecondary enrollment and credentials awarded at Washington public 4-year institutions.
- National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) - For data on postsecondary enrollment and credentials awarded at Washington State private and tribal institutions as well as Out-of-State institutions.
- Employment Security Department Unemployment Insurance wage (ESD) - For workforce data.
- Department of Labor and Industries Registered Apprenticeship (L&I) - For apprenticeship data.
- Department of Children Youth & Families (DCYF) - For foster care data.

The ERDC used Tableau to create the dashboard and shared it with the workgroup for comment. Changes to the dashboard display were made based on user recommendations. As new cohort years are added, and recent legislative changes are implemented, the dashboard's efficacy and utility for tracking student outcomes, progress toward parity, and other trends over time will continue to evolve and improve.

The dashboard is available to the public - <https://erdc.wa.gov/publications-and-reports/special-student-populations-dashboard>

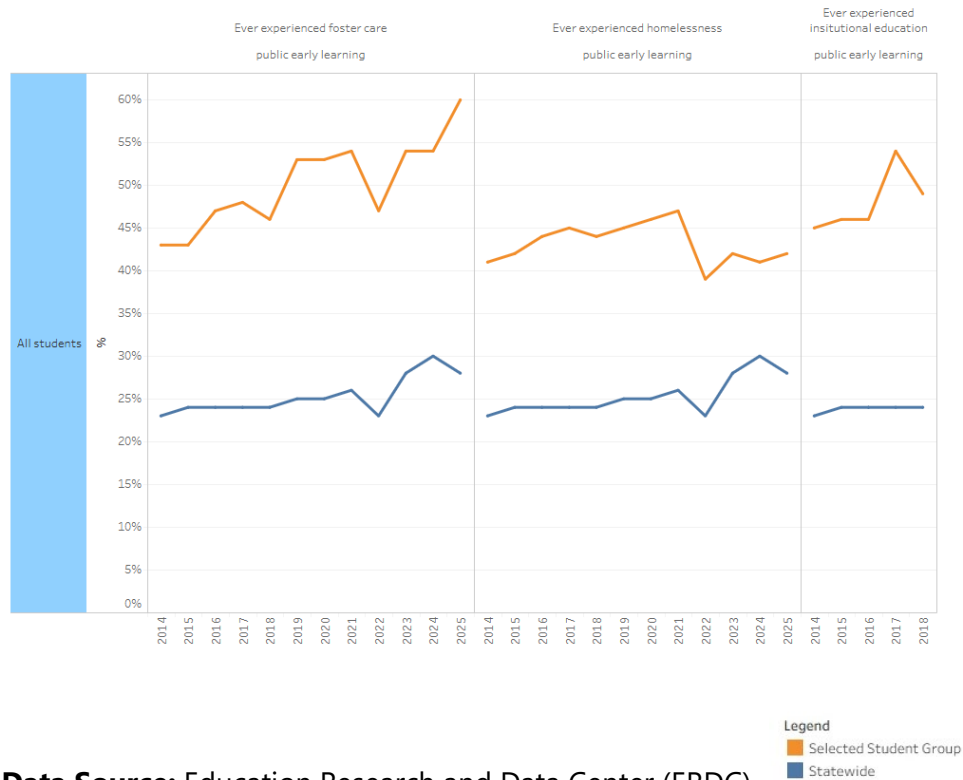
Student Group Education Outcomes

Early Learning Participation

A new outcome included this year is the enrollment of these student groups in state run, early learning programs. Early learning participation among kindergarteners who have ever experienced foster care has been increasing over time, with 60% of 2025 kindergarteners participating in a publicly funded early learning program the year prior. For kindergarteners who have ever experienced homelessness, early learning participation has been increasing during the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but has not recovered fully to the 47% pre-pandemic participation. In the limited number of years of data available for kindergarteners who have ever experienced institutional education, early learning participation increases over time (49% participation for 2018 kindergarteners). Early learning participation for these student groups is not comparable to statewide participation.

Graph 1: Publicly funded early learning program participation is measured by enrollment in any of the following state-administered programs: Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), Working Connections childcare (WCCC) subsidy, Early childhood special education (Part B, section 619 of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)), Transition to kindergarten (TK), or Title 1 Part A early learning. Due to eligibility requirements for publicly funded early learning programs, figures are not comparable to all students statewide.

Graph 1: All Student Groups - What percent of kindergarteners participated in a publicly funded early learning program the year prior?



Data Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC).

Kindergarten Readiness

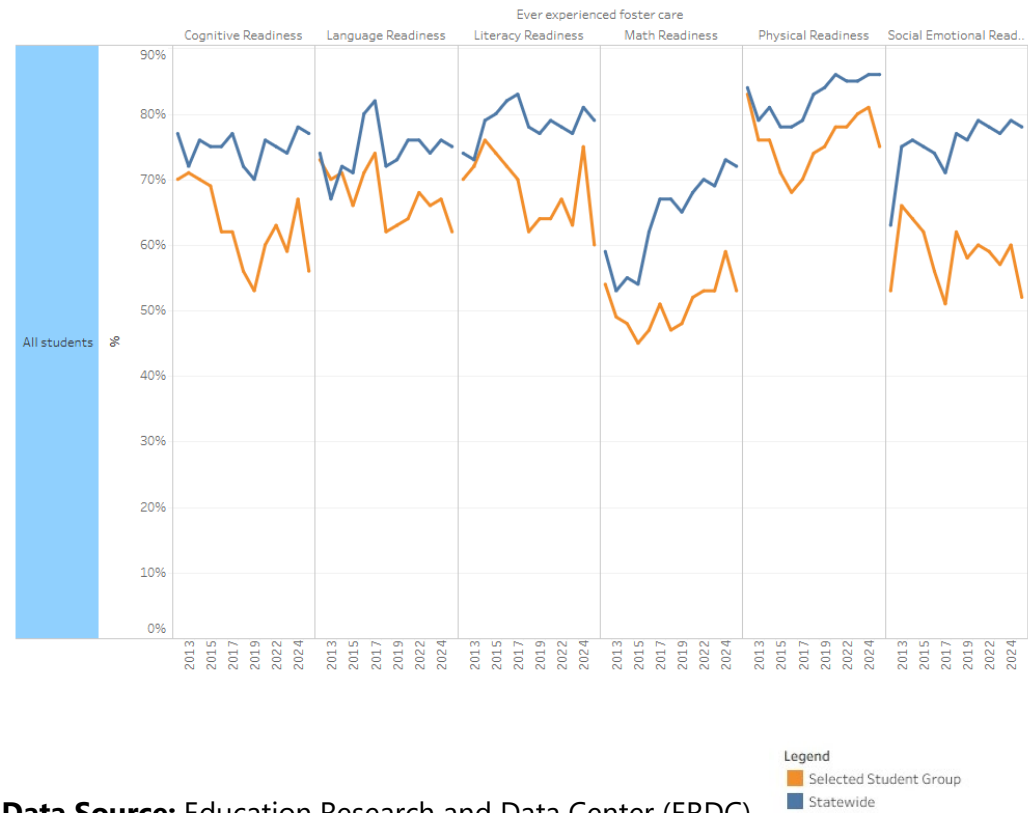
For students who ever experienced foster care, the largest gaps with peers are in the social emotional domain, with 60% of 2024 Kindergarteners who ever experienced foster care ready in this domain compared to 79% of all students statewide. For students who have ever experienced homelessness, the largest gaps with peers are in the domains of math (50% readiness in 2025 compared to 72% of all students statewide) and literacy (59% readiness in 2025 compared to 79% of all students statewide). For students who have ever experienced institutional education, comparisons cannot be made with the limited data available.

Graph 2 and 3: The Washington Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS), a legislatively mandated assessment of students in state funded, full day kindergarten began in the 2012 school year but was not fully implemented until the 2018 school year. Early implementation occurred at high poverty

schools offering full day kindergarten. Prior to full implementation, kindergarten readiness rates for specific students groups are not comparable to the statewide rates.

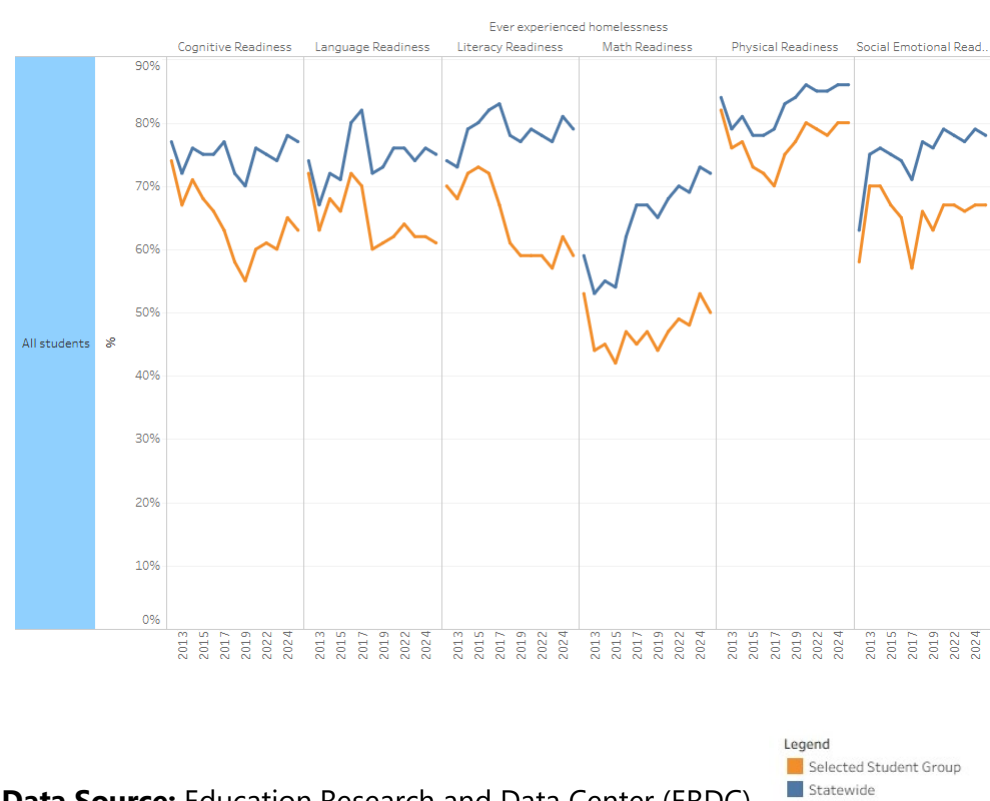
Measure includes first time Kindergarteners only. Due to recalibration of the kindergarten readiness cut scores, results from the 2016–17 school year and on are not comparable with results from previous years. We would recommend against making year-to-year comparisons at this time. No WaKIDS data is made available for academic year 2020–2021 due to COVID-19 pandemic related data collection and data quality issues.

Graph 2: Student Group: Foster Care - What percent of students enter kindergarten ready in each domain?



Data Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC)

Graph 3: Student Group: Homeless – What percentage of students entered kindergarten ready in each domain?



Data Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC).

High School Graduation

For all student groups, there are small decreases over time in the graduation gap with peers, but large gaps still remain. For example, 30% of 2019 8th graders who ever experienced institutional education earned a high school diploma within 8 years compared to 82% of all students statewide.

Graph 4: Eight years after 8th grade aligns with about the time that most students would be 21 years old. If multiple credentials are earned by a student, the highest credential obtained (high school diploma) is represented.

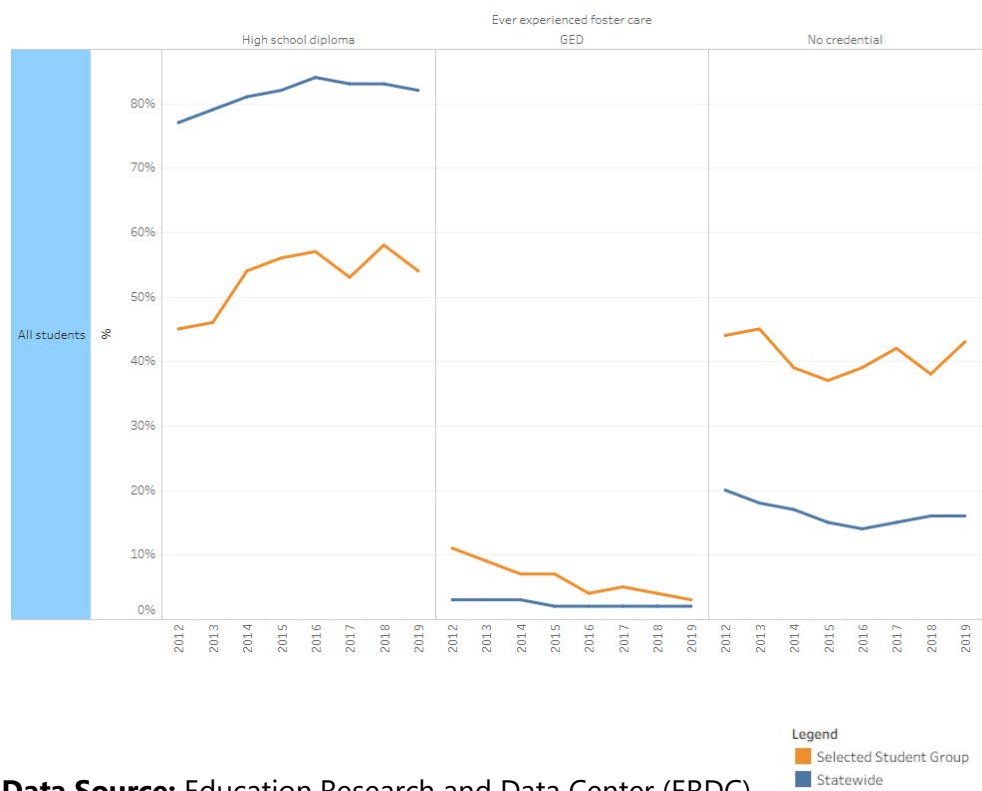
This calculation excludes those who transferred out of WA public school system and students reported as deceased. Neither does it include those who transfer in.

Students who earn a high school diploma at a WA community college are included.

This calculation tracks the same group of 8th graders longitudinally until 8 years after they first enroll in 8th grade.

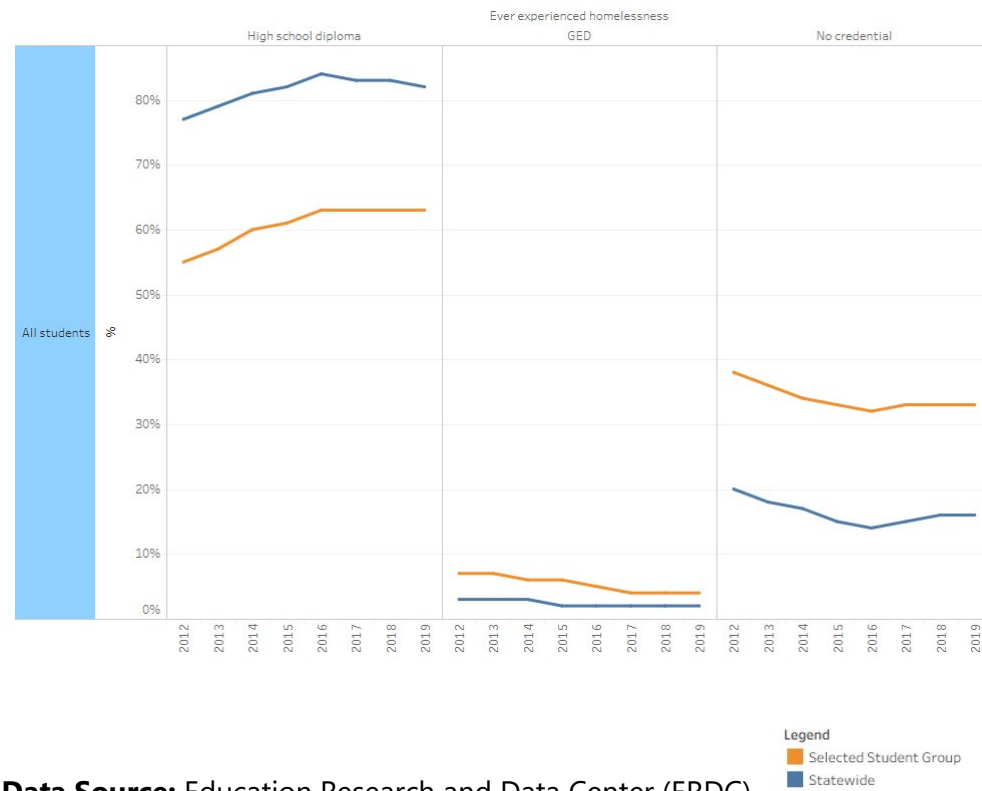
These rates are not comparable to the graduation rates generated by OSPI and displayed on the OSPI report card.

Graph 4: Student Group: Foster Care – What percentage of students earned a high school diploma or GED within 8 years of 8th grade?



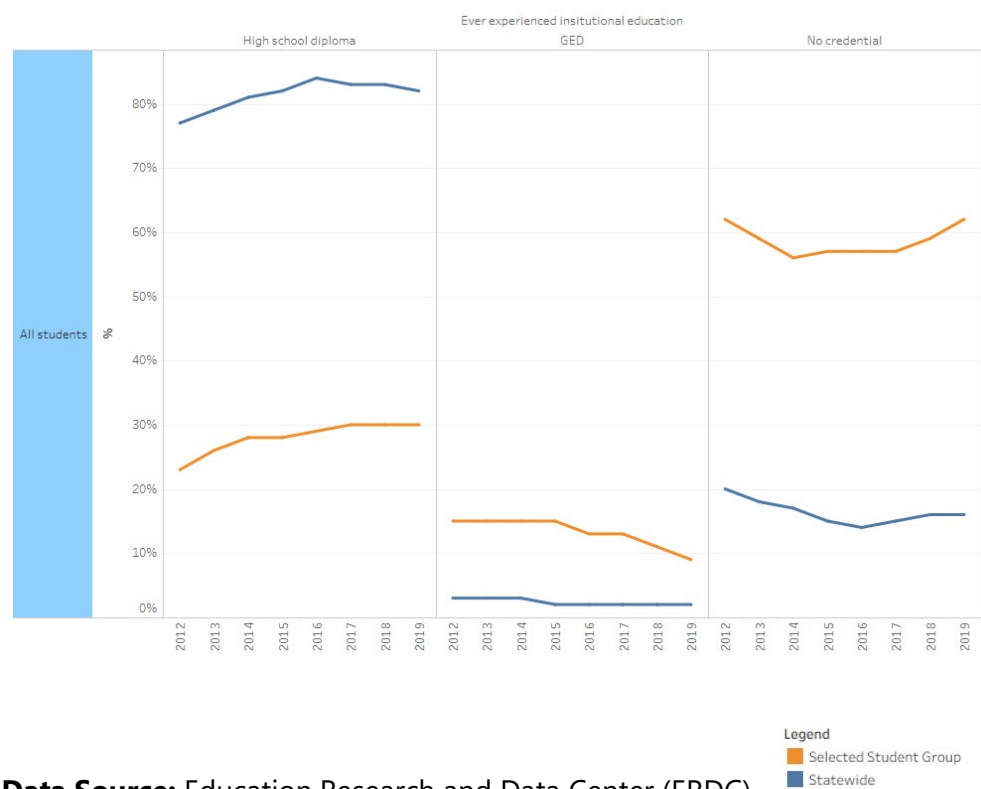
Data Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC).

Graph 5: Student Group: Homelessness – What percent of students earned a high school diploma or GED within 8 years of 8th grade?



Data Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC).

Graph 6: Student Group: Institutional Education – What percent of students earned a high school diploma or GED within 8 years of the 8th grade?



Data Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC)

Postsecondary Enrollment

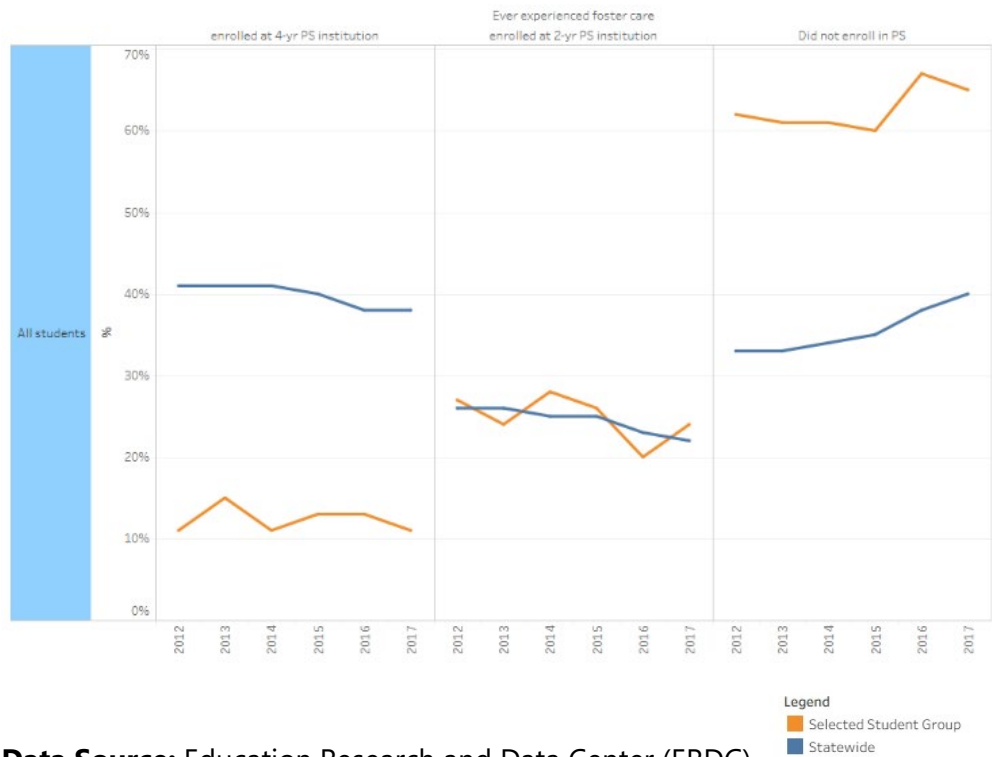
Enrollment at 2-year postsecondary institutions among students who ever experienced foster care or homelessness is similar to their peers, but for students who ever experienced institutional education there are peer gaps, with 15% of 2017 8th graders enrolling within 8 years compared to 22% of all students statewide. For enrollment at 4-year postsecondary institutions, there are large gaps with peers among all student groups. For example, 12% of 2017 8th graders who ever experienced homelessness enrolled within 8 years compared to 38% of all students statewide.

Graph 7–9: The postsecondary enrollment rates will not match the rates on the ERDC High School Outcomes Dashboard due to different measures and cohort definitions. The ERDC Dashboard reports on the postsecondary outcomes for students who graduate from high school. These postsecondary enrollment rates are calculated for the 8th grade cohort regardless of when or how they exited K–12.

Postsecondary enrollment does not include students who only enrolled as lifelong learners or in basic skills courses. Students who only enroll in these courses are not in a program that would lead to a certificate or degree.

The denominator for postsecondary enrollment is the number of students in the 8th grade per student group and cohort year.

Graph 7: Student Group: Foster Care – What percent of students enrolled in college within 8 years of 8th grade?



Data Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC)

Graph 8: Student Group: Homelessness – What percent of students enrolled in college within 8 years of 8th grade?



Data Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC)

Graph 9: Student Group: Institutional Education - What percent of students enrolled in college within 8 years of 8th grade?



Data Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC)

Postsecondary Completion

For all groups, there are smaller gaps with peers in completion of associate degrees and certificates, and larger gaps with peers in completion of bachelor's and graduate degrees. For example, 3% of postsecondary enrollees who ever experienced institutional education completed a bachelor's or graduate degree within 11 years of 8th grade compared to 37% of all students statewide, while 6% completed an associate degree compared to 12% of all students statewide (2014 cohort).

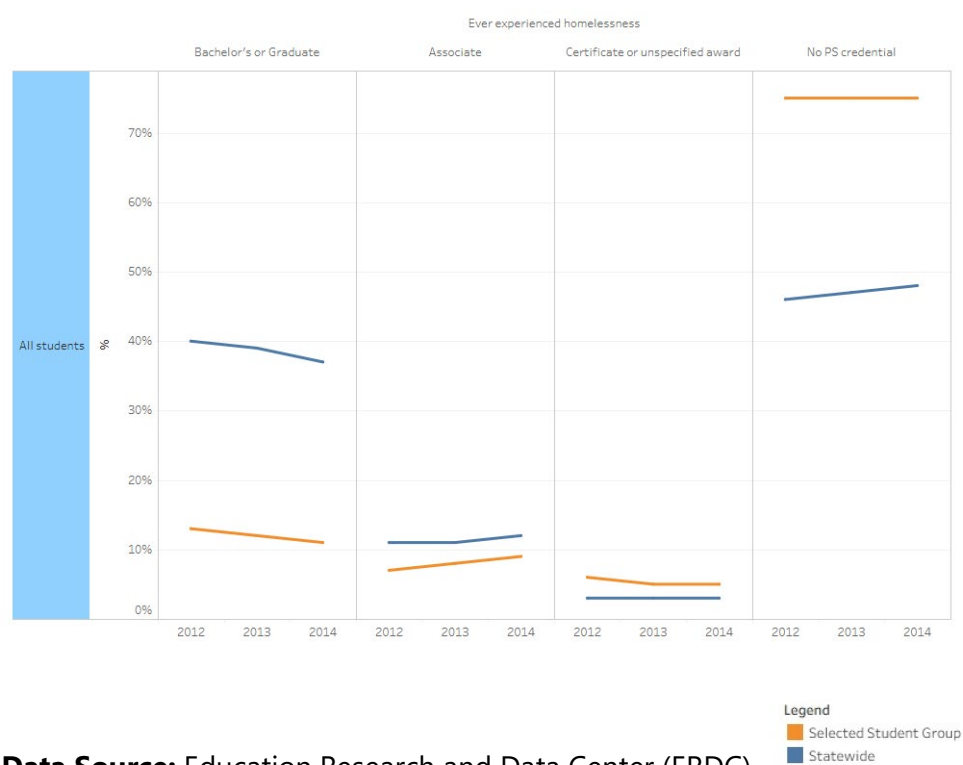
Graph 10–12: The postsecondary completion rates will not match the rates on the ERDC High School Outcomes Dashboard due to different measures and cohort definitions. The ERDC Dashboard reports on the postsecondary outcomes for students who graduate from high school. These postsecondary completion rates are calculated for the 8th grade cohort regardless of when or how they exited K–12. Postsecondary enrollment does not include students who only enrolled as lifelong learners or in basic skills courses. Students who only enroll in these courses are not in a program that would lead to a certificate or degree. Completion rates are calculated using all students in the 8th grade cohort who enrolled in postsecondary as the denominator. A credential refers to both certificates and degrees. Completion rates may be lower due to COVID-19. Outcomes are displayed for cohorts with an adequate number of years of follow up.

Graph 10: Student Group: Foster Care – What were the highest postsecondary degrees attained within 11 years after 8th grade?



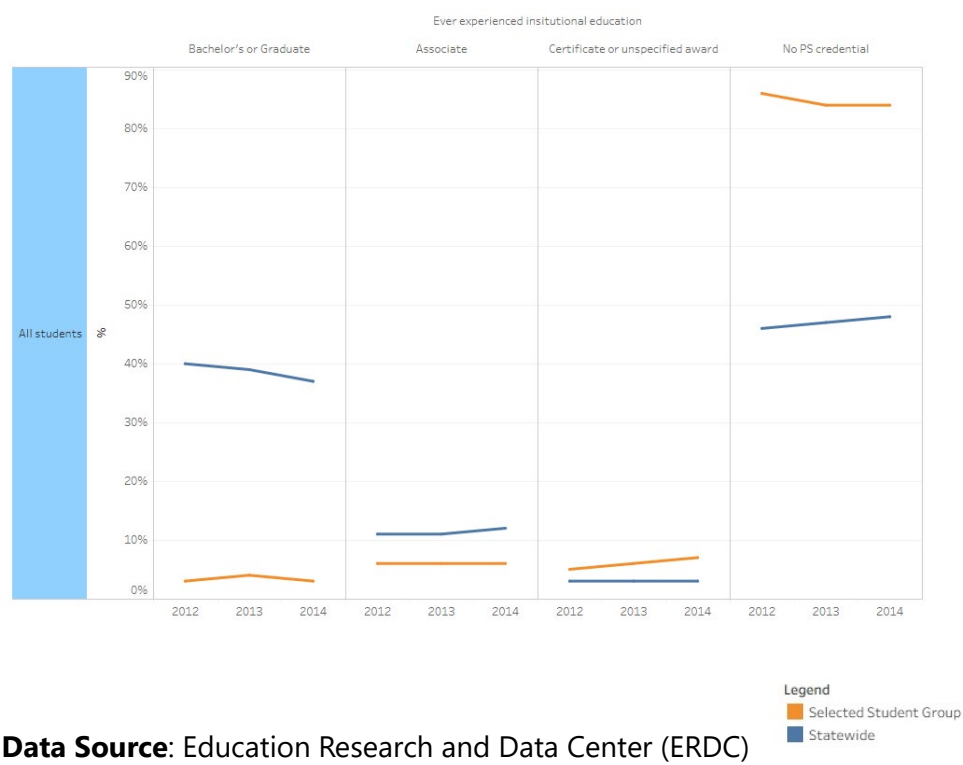
Data Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC)

Graph 11: Student Group: Homelessness – What were the highest postsecondary degrees attained within 11 years after 8th grade?



Data Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC)

Graph 12: Student Group: Institutional Education – What were the highest postsecondary degrees attained within 11 years after 8th grade?



Data Source: Education Research and Data Center (ERDC)

WORKGROUP 2026 EFFORTS

Root Cause Analysis Process

To identify the primary factors contributing to disparities in educational outcomes for students experiencing foster care, homelessness, or involvement in the juvenile justice system, the PEI Workgroup conducted a structured root cause analysis (RCA) using the Ishikawa (Fishbone) Diagram² framework. This methodology provided a systematic approach for examining the complex and interrelated factors influencing student outcomes, enabling the workgroup to move beyond surface-level symptoms and identify underlying causes. By focusing on root causes, the workgroup was better positioned to identify strategies and recommendations that address systemic barriers and support meaningful, long-term improvements in educational success for these student populations.

A fishbone analysis was selected because the academic outcomes of students experiencing foster care, homelessness, and juvenile justice are influenced by multiple, interconnected factors beyond surface-level indicators, such as attendance and academic performance. This tool enabled a multidisciplinary team of stakeholders from multiple agencies and external partners to identify and examine the systemic conditions contributing to these outcomes. The “5 Whys” technique was used to further explore contributing factors and move from observable indicators to underlying conditions within the fishbone analysis. Together, these approaches supported a shared understanding of the problem, highlighted areas of overlap and shared responsibility across systems, and identified opportunities for coordinated, system-level improvement.

A team of subject matter experts within OSPI was convened to establish and formalize the problem statement: “Students experiencing foster care, homelessness, and juvenile justice continue to achieve academic outcomes at lower rates compared to their peers.” This problem statement served as the common framework for all subsequent root cause analysis (RCA) activities and ensured that each discussion remained focused on the same identified issue.

Three RCA sessions were conducted. The first session served as a train-the-trainer session, during which participants were introduced to the fishbone RCA methodology and then applied the approach to the identified problem statement. Two additional sessions were conducted as independent fishbone analysis discussions. Throughout the three sessions, participants representing multiple state agencies and external partners identified and examined potential contributing factors and underlying conditions associated with the problem.

The process resulted in three independent fishbone analyses of the same problem statement, providing multiple perspectives across agencies and partner organizations and supporting the

² The Ishikawa diagram, also called a fishbone or cause-and-effect diagram, is a structured tool used to identify and organize potential causes of a problem. It provides a visual way to group contributing factors and explore how they may interact. By looking beyond surface-level symptoms, the tool helps teams understand the underlying causes of complex problems and identify opportunities to address them at their source.

identification of common themes, areas of shared responsibility, and potential opportunities for coordinated system-level improvement.

Additional RCA sessions were held directly with students experiencing the juvenile justice system. These sessions yielded results that identified several interconnected influences on educational outcomes: family and parental influence, early environment or “origin,” poverty, access to encouragement, validation from trusted adults, brain development, treatment by others, a sense of belonging and personal choices. Participants also challenged the idea that foster care, homelessness, or juvenile justice automatically determines academic performance. Their responses emphasized that lived experiences may shape a student’s path, but supportive adults, positive expectations, access to opportunity, and personal agency can change the outcome. The key takeaway from these sessions was that the students believed that, although their circumstances may influence academic outcomes, those circumstances do not have to determine their future.

RCA Findings

All completed analyses were consolidated into a single spreadsheet and reviewed for recurring factors, common themes, and underlying system conditions. The frequency and consistency of factors, their connection to the identified problem, and opportunities within the system’s control were considered in identifying the most prominent themes and system drivers.

Overarching Themes

The themes generated through the root-cause analyses are consistent with a substantial body of research demonstrating that academic outcomes for students experiencing foster care, homelessness, juvenile justice, and other forms of instability are shaped by interconnected individual, relational, institutional, and structural conditions, rather than by any single student characteristic or experience. All fishbone analyses identified consistent, interconnected factors contributing to lower academic outcomes for students experiencing foster care, homelessness, juvenile justice, as well as other significant barriers, resulting in the development of nine overarching themes:

1. Instability and mobility disrupt learning: Frequent school changes, housing instability, transportation challenges, foster care placements, and family mobility interrupt educational stability. Root causes, including affordable housing shortages, economic instability, family crises, and transportation limitations, cause continuous disruptions to attendance, relationships, credit accrual, and overall school engagement.
2. Poverty and unmet basic needs affect academic success: Food and housing insecurity, limited healthcare access, inadequate technology, and family caregiving or employment responsibilities consistently interfere with learning. Generational poverty, rising cost of living, low wages, and regional resource inequities are foundational challenges that force students to prioritize basic survival needs over education.
3. Trauma and mental health influence student outcomes: Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health needs, and chronic stress significantly

impact student success. Limited behavioral health services, provider shortages, and insufficient trauma-informed supports reduce student ability to attend, concentrate, regulate emotions, and fully engage in learning.

4. Fragmented systems leave students without coordinated support: Schools, child welfare agencies, behavioral health providers, transportation systems, and community organizations often operate independently. Poor communication, limited data sharing, unclear roles, staff turnover, and separate funding streams create service gaps that prevent students from receiving coordinated support.
5. Educational systems often do not meet the needs of highly mobile students: Current educational policies and structures are largely designed around traditional students with stable attendance, consistent transportation, and family support. Limited scheduling flexibility, alternative pathways, and smaller learning environments make it difficult for students with complex life circumstances to succeed within traditional school models.
6. School climate and discipline practices can increase disengagement: Punitive discipline, inconsistent enforcement, and limited restorative practices disproportionately affect students experiencing trauma. Insufficient trauma-informed training and traditional behavior management approaches often result in students being punished for behaviors rooted in unmet needs, increasing disengagement from school.
7. Access to resources remains a challenge: Although many supports exist, families frequently struggle to access them due to fragmented communication, outdated information, language barriers, geographic disparities, staffing shortages, and limited-service availability. As a result, available resources are often underutilized.
8. Funding and policy constraints limit sustainable support: Programs serving vulnerable student populations frequently rely on inconsistent or short-term pilot funding. State and federal funding limitations, dependence on local levies, and funding models designed around traditional education systems contribute to uneven access to services across communities.
9. Belonging, engagement, and future opportunities matter: Students feel connected to school through trusted adults, culturally responsive learning, extracurricular opportunities, and exposure to postsecondary pathways. When students do not feel represented, supported, or hopeful about their future, motivation and engagement may decline. Students may seek belonging in other spaces, potentially diverting their attention from developing and pursuing educational and future goals.

Across all fishbone analyses, academic outcomes were shaped less by individual student characteristics and more by interconnected systemic conditions. Housing instability, poverty, trauma, fragmented services, traditional educational structures, resource barriers, and inconsistent funding reinforce one another, creating cumulative obstacles to success. These analyses suggest that improving outcomes for vulnerable student populations requires coordinated, cross-system strategies that address both educational practices and the broader social conditions influencing student achievement. From these nine overarching themes, the advisory committee identified three root cause categories that encompassed where there was crossover or similarity between themes. These included

the **impacts of instability, resource and funding issues**, and the **need for engagement and belonging**.

System Drivers

After identifying root causes, the workgroup began to identify system drivers. A system driver is a key condition, structure, policy, or practice within a larger system that influences outcomes for a group of people. In the context of highly mobile students, systems drivers help us look beyond individual student circumstances to understand how educational, housing, transportation, child welfare, and community systems contribute to student mobility and academic outcomes. Identifying root causes allows us to uncover the underlying factors that create barriers to stability, such as housing insecurity, fragmented services, transportation challenges, or policies designed for traditionally stable students. By focusing on systems drivers and root causes, the committee can begin to develop coordinated solutions to address the source of challenges rather than only responding to their symptoms.

The workgroup identified the following primary, system drivers:

- *An overreliance by state systems and policymakers on the education system to address this population's circumstances leads to instability.* While education systems play a key role, they cannot address these students' circumstances alone. Other systems also have responsibilities, and transitions between systems can create gaps, disruptions, and additional instability for students and families.
- *Inadequate and inequitable access to consistent funding and resources.* Inadequate and inequitable resources may result not only from state-level funding allocations but also from funding decisions made at the local level.
- *School environments currently struggle to create an atmosphere of belonging for this population which leads them to be disengaged.* Extracurricular activities often provide important connections between students and their schools and can contribute to students' sense of belonging and engagement.

The main concerns identified are systems fragmentation combined with inequitable funding and diffuse accountability. The interaction of siloed governance, rigid funding rules, weak shared accountability, and limited local and regional cross program coordination creates structural instability, particularly for students experiencing high mobility, foster care placement, housing instability, or multi-system involvement. The disruption is less about individual programs and more about misaligned systems that prioritize compliance, jurisdictional boundaries, and funding categories over education continuity and shared responsibility for student outcomes. Program-specific solutions may provide incremental improvements, but without systems-level reform, the state risks continued instability, reactive service delivery, and long-term inequitable outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Preserve Critical Programs

The workgroup's findings point to a clear need for a more coordinated, systems-level approach to address fragmentation and improve outcomes. The workgroup recommends maintaining funding for the limited number of programs and services specifically designed to support students experiencing foster care, homelessness, and the juvenile justice system. These investments are critical to preserving essential supports and promoting educational stability for some of the state's most vulnerable students. Key programs include:

- Child Welfare Early Learning Navigator Program.
- Homeless Student Stability Education Program.
- Institutional Education Advocates.
- Foster Care Education Advocacy and Graduation Success Programs.
- Passport to Careers Scholarship Program.

Reducing funding for these programs would weaken established support networks, disrupt critical services, and create additional barriers to academic success. Sustained investment is necessary to ensure continuity of support, strengthen educational stability, and advance equitable outcomes for students experiencing foster care, homelessness, and involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Align State Statutes

Additionally, the workgroup reiterates its recommendation from the 2025 report to align state statutes governing educational supports for students experiencing homelessness, foster care, and institutional education. While existing state and federal laws provide important protections for these student populations, the current framework remains fragmented, with differing requirements, policies, and procedures based on housing status or court involvement. These inconsistencies create unnecessary complexity for students, families, and educators despite the similar mobility challenges and educational disruptions these groups often experience.

Aligning state statutes would promote greater consistency between federal requirements and state law, establishing a unified policy framework that supports educational stability and equitable access to services. Consistent policies and procedures would help ensure timely transfer of records, access to assessments, identification of support needs, and delivery of appropriate interventions. By reducing barriers created by disparate statutory requirements, Washington can better support educational continuity and parity of opportunity for highly mobile students, helping them remain connected to school and receive the supports necessary for academic success.

Specifically, the committee recommends the modification and alignment of the following state statutes, related to school stability for students in foster care, to include students experiencing homelessness and juvenile justice:

[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.

[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 their 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.

[RCW 28A.150.510](#) Transmittal of education records—disclosure of education records—data sharing agreements. Add students in state institutions to the definition.

Next Steps

In year two, the workgroup plans to focus on the development of a coherent strategy that aligns policy, practice, accountability, and implementation across agencies and various stakeholders. The advisory committee aims to focus on the following priorities:

- Identify and elevate best practices that improve outcomes for students experiencing foster care, homelessness, and juvenile justice involvement.
- Examine areas of fragmentation, duplication, and service gaps across systems and programs.
- Review existing evaluation and accountability processes to identify opportunities for improvement.
- Incorporate the lived experiences of students, families, and caregivers to inform recommendations and ensure solutions address real-world barriers.
- Develop a policy framework that aligns governance structures, funding mechanisms, and accountability expectations across agencies.
- Create cross-agency and legislative recommendations that:
 - Clarify roles and responsibilities.
 - Strengthen interagency coordination.
 - Support consistent implementation.

- Establish common measures for evaluating effectiveness.
- Develop a multi-year implementation plan with clear milestones, ownership, and decision-making structures.
- Embed accountability measures and continuous improvement processes within system operations.
- Establish ongoing data monitoring and evaluation to:
 - Track implementation progress.
 - Identify disparities and emerging needs.
 - Measure the impact of policies and interventions on student outcomes.

The workgroup ultimate goal is to work towards the development of a more integrated, equitable, and sustainable system that supports highly mobile students through coordinated action, meaningful stakeholder engagement, and a shared framework for monitoring implementation, evaluating effectiveness, and measuring progress toward improved student outcomes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Members of the PEI Workgroup and the authors of this report would like to recognize the leadership of Aaron Yared, Director of Policy & External Affairs at Building Changes for the co-facilitating the workgroup and for his extensive contributions to the writing and preparation of this report.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Workgroup Members

Table 1: Workgroup Membership

Name	Organization
Peggy Carlson	Department of Children Youth & Families
Dawn Cypriano-McAferly	Washington Student Achievement Council
Eileen Davidson	Treehouse (Alternate)
Cierra Draper-West	University of Washington
Danielle Eidenberg	Education Ombuds Office
Adam Haizlip	Department of Children Youth & Families
Arlene Hampton	Treehouse
Arthur Longworth	Team Child
Heather McCabe	Office of Financial Management
Rosemary Peterson	Department of Commerce
Melissa Raap	University of Washington
Kalyn Yasutake	City of Seattle

Table 2: Chair Members

Name	Organization
Dixie Grunenfelder	Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction
Aaron Yared	Building Changes

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