

Horizons Regional Grant Program

Year One Report

2024 – 2025 School Year



Washington STEM



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The Horizons Regional Grant Program was launched in 2024 to accelerate regional efforts that support students in their transition from high school to postsecondary education, including apprenticeships and two- and four-year degree programs. Built around place-based partnerships, Horizons invests in communities committed to opportunity for all students, while also exploring custom solutions for students who the data show have historically faced the greatest barriers to success, including Black/African-American, Latino, and Indigenous students, and students from rural and low-income communities.

Each of our four regional partnerships is anchored by a “backbone” organization that brings together K–12 school districts, higher education institutions, community-based organizations, and workforce partners. In addition to funding, Horizons partnerships receive technical assistance to help strengthen advising, increase financial aid access, and build data capacity.

Washington STEM serves as the network manager for Horizons, providing direct support to all backbone organizations and technical assistance providers, ensuring regional partnerships have what they need to fulfill their goals. The Horizons Regional Grant Program is fully funded by the Gates Foundation.

Horizons is a regional initiative by design. Each partnership is working toward the same postsecondary outcomes, but through strategies shaped by local context, history, capacity, and community priorities. The data and stories that follow are not meant to be read as a comparison between regions. Instead, they reflect regional momentum, focusing on how each place is building on its own strengths, addressing its own barriers, and moving forward over time. Differences across regions represent varied starting points, funding assumptions, and approaches. These regional snapshots show multiple, complementary pathways toward shared goals.

In its first year of implementation, Horizons helped thousands of students explore, plan for, and pursue life beyond high school. The results are already beginning to show.

Powerful signs of progress

Horizons Leads on FAFSA Completion

FAFSA completion is one of the strongest early signs of postsecondary enrollment and success. In their first year, Horizons students led the way in FAFSA completion, showing what’s possible when schools, families, caregivers, and communities work together.

The data in this document represent FAFSA completion data as of June 30, 2025, a standard national cutoff date that allows leaders and organizations to consistently measure year-over-year FAFSA completion rates. Horizons regions continued to host FAFSA outreach events over the summer to reach any recent graduates who had not yet completed the financial aid form. As a result, completion numbers are likely even higher when factoring in the additional students reached through these summer efforts.

	Horizons regions	Statewide average
FAFSA completion (as of June 30, 2025)	54%	48%
Increase from 2024 to 2025	+10 percentage points	+6 percentage points

These numbers only reflect FAFSA completion data. Washington state also offers the WASFA (Washington Application for State Financial Aid), an alternative form that unlocks access to state financial aid, including the Washington College Grant (WA Grant). Students who are undocumented or with undocumented parents, or with privacy concerns, can complete this form, and there is evidence that more families are choosing this option right now to protect their privacy.

Key FAFSA milestones across Horizons

- **54% FAFSA completion across** Horizons regions: six points higher than the state average of 48%.
- **Program-wide 10-point increase in FAFSA completion** from 2024 to 2025 (compared to a 6-point increase statewide).
- As of June 30, 2025: **3,500 of the 6,474 students** in Horizons districts completed the FAFSA, opening the door to college, job training, and opportunity.

Students supported by Horizons had promising FAFSA results

- **Black/African-American students** in the South King County Partnership region: 72% completion (17 points above the state average).
- **Latino students:** 50% in the Elevate Postsecondary Partnership region and South King County Partnership region (7 points above the state average); 11% gains in Horizons Advising Partnership region over the last two years.
- **Indigenous students** in the Postsecondary Readiness and Enrollment on the Peninsulas (PREP) region: 53% FAFSA completion (20 points above the state average) with one school increasing from 20% to 83% completion rate in this population.
- **Students impacted by poverty:** 60% in South King County Partnership region, 48% in Elevate Postsecondary Partnership region (vs. 44% statewide).
- **Students from rural communities:** 57% in Elevate Postsecondary Partnership region.

Statewide leadership, local progress

Additional Year One Highlights

In addition to strong gains in FAFSA completion, Horizons regions achieved meaningful progress in their first year. Key wins across all regions include:

Expanded high-quality advising

- Using Horizons grant funding, partnerships in three regions hired and trained **new College and Career Readiness Advisors** and placed them in partner schools, while a fourth region worked to strengthen and coordinate existing one-to-one advising capacity.
- These grant-funded advisors provided one-on-one support to more than **5,000 students**.
- Advisors in all four regions used **real-time data** to identify students who needed more help and deliver support when students needed it, often alongside families and in multiple languages.

College and career exposure

- Grant funding was used to ensure more than **2,500 students** could attend college visits, career site visits, or industry engagement events. This was on top of existing visits hosted by school districts in each region.
- Partnerships began aligning K-12, higher education, and workforce systems to offer **clearer, more coherent paths** into postsecondary success.

- College and career awareness events were localized, driven by the needs of local students and families, and brought students face-to-face with real-world possibilities.

Dual credit growth

- Dual credit offerings expanded in all regions, with new career and technical education (CTE) and academic courses aligning with local workforce needs.
- Advising teams helped demystify dual credit options like College in the High School and Running Start, especially for students from underrepresented communities.

Infrastructure for lasting impact

- All partnerships set up backbone structures, cross-sector steering committees, and processes to coordinate across their region.
- Two regions initiated plans for regional data systems that will allow partners to share, analyze, and act on student data in real time.
- Partners adopted shared implementation plans and began embedding postsecondary readiness into school and district improvement strategies.

Spotlight on Regional Wins

Horizons Advising Partnership

Backbone: Educational Service District 112

Region Focus: 12 rural districts across Southwest Washington

Website: www.esd112.org/horizons/

FAFSA Growth: +8 points |

FAFSA Completion Rate: 42%

Latino student FAFSA growth: +11% in the last two years

	Horizons Advising Partnership	Statewide average
FAFSA completion (as of June 30, 2025)	42%	48%
Increase from 2024 to 2025	+8 percentage points	+6 percentage points
Increase in FAFSA completion from 2023 to 2025: Latino students	+11 percentage points	

Year 1 Highlights

- **70% of seniors** received one-on-one advising, with districts delivering **2,300+ advising sessions**.
- FAFSA completion rose 8 points, and more than **30 new dual credit options** were introduced.
- Advisors hosted **117 college and career field trips and 200+ group sessions**.
- Launched planning for a **regional P-20 Data Center** with WSU Vancouver to improve data infrastructure.

Next Steps

Strengthen district-level ownership, deepen higher education engagement, and streamline dual credit systems.

Story

Wahkiakum High School graduate Gary once doubted that college was an option after seeing his father struggle with student loan debt and leave school without a degree. With the support of his College and Career Readiness Advisor, Rory Heywood, Gary received personalized guidance on financial aid, explored programs aligned with his goals, and ultimately applied to Washington State University. He was admitted and will attend this fall with his tuition fully covered. Gary's journey reflects how locally rooted advising can transform uncertainty into confidence and opportunity.

Leadership Quote

"When students understand the financial aid options available to them and can clearly see a path beyond high school, their outlook changes completely. We observe that transformation across the region, driven by the power of personalized, locally rooted advising. It's not just about the numbers; it's about unlocking opportunity for every student."

— **Jake Ptacek**, Postsecondary Readiness Manager, ESD 112

Elevate Postsecondary Partnership

Backbone: United Way of the Blue Mountains

Region Focus: Columbia and Walla Walla counties

Website: www.uwbluemt.org/postsecondary-access-success

FAFSA Growth: +9 points

FAFSA Completion Rate: 48%

FAFSA completion by Group: Latino:50% | Low-income: 48% | Rural districts: 57%

	Elevate Postsecondary Partnership	Statewide average
FAFSA completion (as of June 30, 2025)	48%	48%
Increase from 2024 to 2025	+9 percentage points	+6 percentage points
FAFSA completion rate: Latino students	50%	43%
FAFSA completion rate: Low-income students	48%	44%
FAFSA completion rate: Rural students	57%	43%

Year 1 Highlights

- Served **834 students** (55% Latino, 65% low-income) through direct advising; **85%** of students identified a postsecondary plan.
- FAFSA completion increased from **39% to 48%**.
- **Four of five high schools met or exceeded FAFSA goals**, and College Place School District made financial aid completion and at least one college application a **graduation requirement**.
- Academia Familiar was launched to engage Latino families in postsecondary planning.
- Coordination with Walla Walla Community College to improve dual credit and math readiness.
- Set up **school-based “ecosystem” teams** and launched **student voice** data collection through student, teacher, and family surveys.

Next Steps

Strengthen regional data system, expand school-wide advising culture through all-school professional development, preview college and career readiness curriculum, and deepen dual credit alignment.

Story

A Walla Walla parent joined the bilingual Family Academy, led by the Elevate Postsecondary Partnership, feeling overwhelmed by the college and financial aid process and unsure how to support their student. Over eight weekly evening sessions, complete with dinner, childcare, and time for questions, the parent learned how FAFSA/WASFA works, which local two- and four-year programs are available, and how to map out next steps. At the final session, the parent shared: “I am no longer scared to ask for help.” They left with a clear plan to support their student’s applications this fall. The Academy demonstrates how confident, informed families open doors to college opportunities.

Leadership Quote

“When families understand the process and feel supported, their confidence grows and that confidence transfers directly to students. We’re seeing whole households begin to see college as something that is for them.”

- **Amy Ly**, Director of Postsecondary Access, Elevate

Postsecondary Readiness and Enrollment on the Peninsulas (PREP)

Backbone: West Sound STEM Network

Region Focus: 15 rural and Tribal-serving districts on Olympic and Kitsap Peninsulas

Website: www.westsoundstem.org/prep

FAFSA Growth: +14 points

FAFSA Completion Rate: 45%

FAFSA Completion by Group: Indigenous students: 53% | Black students, 59% | Rural districts: 45%

	Postsecondary Readiness and Enrollment on the Peninsulas (PREP)	Statewide average
FAFSA completion (as of June 30, 2025)	45%	48%
Increase from 2024 to 2025	+14 percentage points	+6 percentage points
FAFSA completion rate: Indigenous students	53%	33%
FAFSA completion rate: Black students	59%	55%
FAFSA completion rate: Rural students	45%	43%

Year 1 Highlights

- West Sound STEM Network and College Success Foundation partnered to deliver one-on-one advising to **232 seniors**, with more than **1,500 students** receiving additional advising, many for the first time.
- FAFSA completion increased from **31% to 45%**, with some districts reaching over **80%**.
- Organized career-connected field trips and college fairs across remote areas, serving **800+ students**.
- Launched new dual credit courses in biomedical sciences, culinary arts, and horticulture.
- Strengthened family engagement strategies, including **Food + FAFSA + Future** events with childcare, meals, and personalized family advising.

Next Steps

PREP is strengthening the regional college and career fair network and system-wide family engagement. At the same time, PREP is increasing alignment between K–12 and higher education pathways and deepening cross-sector partnerships that actively support postsecondary enrollment and successful transitions beyond high school.

Story

On the Kitsap and Olympic Peninsulas, PREP expanded access by providing college and career travel opportunities. Many students had never been to a college campus or envisioned themselves there. Before, districts could send only 16 students to a local community college and could not afford visits to four-year universities or participation in campus events. Now, districts have been able to take up to twelve times as many students on visits this year, including four-year campuses. One student who had not planned to attend college joined a PREP-supported visit to a four-year university; seeing the campus and the athletics program helped him envision himself there, apply, gain acceptance, and prepare for a future he had not previously imagined.

Leadership Quotes

“The PREP partnership continues to drive regional collaboration, empowering students with the resources and support needed to succeed in their postsecondary journeys.”

- **Dr. Kareen Borders**, Executive Director, West Sound STEM Network

“It’s support for college preparation on steroids. None of the things that we’re doing are brand new, but altogether, we’re putting our arms around every high school junior and senior in our community and walking them through that whole college exploration, college funding, and college experience.”

- **Dr. Suzy Ames**, President, Peninsula College

South King County (SKC) Partnership

Backbone: Puget Sound Educational Service District (PSESD)

Region Focus: Highline, Federal Way, and Tukwila School District in collaboration with Highline College

Website:

www.psesd.org/news/detail/~board/news/post/regional-educators-prepare-to-launch-and-expand-programs-to-help-more-students-design-the-futures-they-want

FAFSA Growth: +10 points

FAFSA Completion Rate: 60%

FAFSA Completion by Group: Black students: 72% | Latino students: 50% | Low-income: 60%

	South King County (SKC) Partnership	Statewide average
FAFSA completion (as of June 30, 2025)	60%	48%
Increase from 2024 to 2025	+10 percentage points	+6 percentage points
FAFSA completion rate: Black students	72%	55%
FAFSA completion rate: Latino students	50%	43%
FAFSA completion rate: Low-income students	60%	44%

Year 1 Highlights

- FAFSA completion increased from **50% to 60%**, with Black/African-American students completing at **72%**.
- Utilizing the district’s multilingual service team, Federal Way Public Schools provided 1:1 financial aid support to families on FAFSA/WASFA completion in their home languages.
- Highline College shifted its college application timeline to align with four-year institutions and improve advising alignment and cadence in English classrooms across the region. This change in how institutions work together impacts students even beyond the Horizons partnership, affecting all school districts in both King and Pierce counties.

- Strong student voice integration at Highline Public Schools continues to shape improvements to high school advising. Student perspectives will remain central to serving scholars' postsecondary needs.
- In addition to Highline Public Schools' year-by-year High School & Beyond Plan advising, the district developed and implemented a new postsecondary training for all building leads (principals, assistant principals, subject leads, and college and career counseling staff).

Next Steps

Build long-term backbone team capacity, coordinate cross-district strategies, address gaps in dual credit access, expand advising outreach to disconnected students and families, better support students enrolled in Running Start, and provide intentional transitional high school staffing for key district pain points in college and career advising.

Story

Previously, Highline College's application window opened months after regional four-year institutions, inadvertently forcing many students who might otherwise have selected Highline as a first choice to treat it as a fallback. PSESD convened district leaders and Highline College teams through multiple conversations to shift the timeline so students could apply at the same time, strengthening advising alignment at the high school level and expanding students' first-choice options in advising conversations. Now, students who once felt limited in their college application choices can consider Highline on equal footing, with clearer supports in place to guide the transition.

Leadership Quote

"This was an unintentional barrier hiding in plain sight. By aligning timelines to reflect local school district needs, we made the college application process more fair and more navigable for the students we are all serving. When systems move together, students gain real choices."

- **Dr. Liz Cook**, Director of Postsecondary Operations, PSESD

Looking ahead

Toward Lasting Change for Washington Students

Horizons partnerships have built a strong base in year one. **What began as a grant opportunity is now becoming a movement rooted in cross-sector trust, local wisdom, and the belief that postsecondary success should be accessible to every student.** As the initiative enters year two, the Gates Foundation and our Horizons partners will focus on four core priorities:

- Scaling high-quality advising with sustainable staffing models
- Dual credit alignment to ensure equitable access and recognition of credits
- Building strong regional data systems that inform and improve strategy in real time
- Embedding successful practices into district and institutional policies that last beyond grant funding

Horizons is starting to show what communities can do when they work together. Local leadership, effective advising, and student-driven collaboration are critical to success. We are grateful to our partners across Washington state and proud of what they are building together. Let's keep going.

For more information about the Horizons Regional Grant Program and our work in Washington state, please visit washingtonstate.gatesfoundation.org

ABOUT THIS REPORT

FAFSA completion rates were calculated using publicly available data from the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC), which matches U.S. Department of Education records to expected high school graduates identified by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). The data report FAFSA completion as of June 30, 2025, consistent with the national Education-to-Workforce (E-W) Indicator Framework. Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA) data are not publicly available at the district level, so analysis of financial aid completion is limited to FAFSA completion only.

