

New Gates Foundation grant will tackle WA's postsecondary problem


April 1, 2024 at 6:00 am | Updated April 1, 2024 at 6:00 am



By **Dahlia Bazzaz**

Seattle Times staff reporter

EDUCATION LAB

Education Lab is a Seattle Times project that spotlights promising approaches to persistent challenges in public education. The Seattle Foundation serves as the fiscal sponsor for Education Lab, which is supported by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. [Learn more about Ed Lab.](#) 

Washington state's relatively low college-going rate has frustrated educators and policymakers for years.

Around 50% of students here go on to get some kind of credential after high school. But to make sure every student has a job in the state's future economy, that rate needs to be closer to 70%, researchers predict.

The state has already dedicated billions toward closing this gap. But in the wake of the pandemic's college enrollment crisis, the issue is getting a fresh round of investment from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

A new grant program, called Horizons, will dedicate \$19 million toward elevating the strongest work on this problem. And, in a new move for the Foundation's Washington state division, it will focus on areas outside of the Puget Sound region. The money will be invested in four areas across Washington, including the Seattle area, the Olympic Peninsula, Southwest Washington and Southeast Washington. (The Seattle Times Education Lab receives funding from the Gates Foundation.)

A number of factors make the college-going rate low here. Some students are concerned about affordability and the time it takes to get a degree. Others may perceive that getting a credential won't help their earning potential in the long run. Washington has also

ranked consistently near the bottom for student completion of the federal financial aid form, or FAFSA; so far this year, only 26% of seniors have finished the form. Completing that form makes a student 84% more likely to immediately enroll in some kind of postsecondary program, according to the National College Attainment Network.

The foundation decided to take a regional approach because each area of the state has its own unique economy and student demographics, said Angela Jones, director of the Gates Foundation Washington State Initiative.

“The community based organizations said, ‘Work alongside us. We know what works ... We need to think about this in a place-based way.’”

In each region, a group of organizations will work together to find and fund the best solutions. This could mean a stronger emphasis on advising students while they’re in high school, or requiring the completion of the FAFSA. Gates will also give technical assistance to each grantee, including ways to collect and analyze data about what’s working.

The goal is to promote these strategies and offer a road map for further investment and implementation in other parts of the state.

The Puget Sound effort — funded at \$2.2 million — will focus partly on ideas that show promise and that already exist in the Highline, Tukwila and Federal Way school districts, said Jonathan Joseph, director of postsecondary sustainability and strategic development at the Puget Sound Educational Service District, which is the leading organization for the Puget Sound area grant.

Federal Way, for example, has a higher FAFSA completion rate — 64% — compared to neighboring districts in South King County.

The service district is looking at “stronger college and career advising protocols, and understanding the barriers that limit Black and brown students,” said Joseph.

In the Southeast Washington region that covers Walla Walla and Columbia counties, the money will help expand more staff at high schools to help with postsecondary planning, said Amanda Mount, director of policy and advocacy at United Way of Blue Mountain.

Their \$2.9 million grant will also fund partnerships with local businesses for job shadows, internships and apprenticeships.

The grant program is part of a larger investment in postsecondary enrollment. In 2022, [the Foundation announced](#) it was dedicating \$75 million toward addressing the problems that prevent students from enrolling in a postsecondary program.

Dahlia Bazzaz: 206-464-8522 or dbazzaz@seattletimes.com;

 [View 14 Comments / 14 New](#)