

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Laying the Foundation King County Promise Early Implementation

In King County, the primary barrier to college access isn't finances or motivation—it is the lack of individualized support.¹ Programs like FAFSA, WAFA, and the Washington College Grant have made tuition more attainable, yet our very motivated students continue to encounter a complex landscape of fragmented policies, a lack of course alignment, and inequitable placement practices.^{2,3} For low-income and prospective first-generation college students, it is the absence of mentorship and navigational support—not cost—that most often limits opportunity. Without a clear path, many never start the journey.

King County Promise (Promise) is a cross-agency initiative designed to transform the postsecondary transition system, supporting young people furthest from educational justice so they may graduate high school and successfully transition to the college or career path of their choosing. Promise offers one-on-one advising, service referrals, postsecondary navigation and transition supports, and an Equity Grant to support them through key milestones in their postsecondary pathway. This initiative also works toward a connected and equity-focused education system by engaging King County school districts, community-based organizations, and Community and Technical Colleges in intentional partnerships.

King County Department of Community and Human Services' (DCHS) Puget Sound Taxpayer Accountability Account (PSTAA)* funds Promise. Per the Implementation Plan for Investment of PSTAA Proceeds (PSTAA Implementation Plan), DCHS also oversees the implementation of the initiative. From 2021 to 2024, DCHS worked closely with Puget Sound College and Career Network (PSCCN), a program of the Puget Sound Educational Service District, to refine the Promise model and begin the implementation effort as the *system supporting organization* (SSO). During the first phase of implementation (school years 2022-23 and 2023-24), efforts focused on building and strengthening partnerships among King County school districts, community-based organizations, and Community and Technical Colleges. In July 2022, two partnerships were awarded two-year contracts.



Being a member of King County Promise means having a community that has my back. It's about being part of a network that is dedicated to seeing students like me succeed, both in college and beyond.

Promise Student

Read the report here

[DCHS Reports and Briefs](#)

About PSTAA*

PSTAA was created as an amendment to the 2015 State Transportation Revenue Package by the Washington State Legislature and directs that Sound Transit 3 (ST3)-related funds be used to improve educational outcomes in early learning, K-12, and postsecondary education.



[DCHS PSTAA Webpage](#)



[State Revenue Amendment](#)



[PSTAA Implementation Plan](#)

Promise Partnerships

During Phase 1, these partnerships worked closely with PSCCN to refine their services. They also focused on building their staff capacity to provide advising services and on developing the resources necessary for implementing Promise's core components (see Promise Phase One full report).

- **Highline Promise Partnership.** Becoming A Man of Youth Guidance, Highline College, Highline Public Schools, and Northwest Education Access
- **Promise to Community Partnership.** Centro Rendú of St. Vincent de Paul, Congolese Integration Network, Northwest Education Access, and Renton Technical College

Early Implementation Outcomes

The King County Promise Early Implementation Report offers insights from Promise's first full school year of data (the 2023-24 school year), which included:

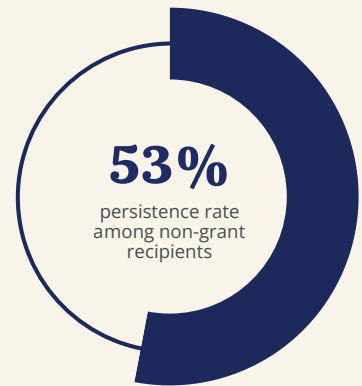
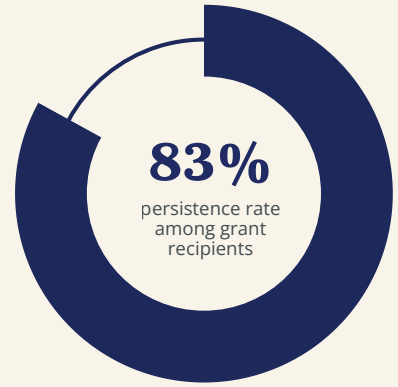
- **Financial aid completion rates increased in 2023-24 despite nationwide challenges.** Promise students in 12th grade had a 70% financial aid application completion rate during the 2023-24 school year, higher than the King County average (53%).
- **Promise students who received an Equity Grant were more likely to persist to year 2 of college.** Among first-year college students, 83% of those who received an Equity Grant persisted to their second year, compared to 53% of those who did not.
- **Intentional hiring practices strengthened program effectiveness.** Promise programs intentionally hire staff who share similar backgrounds with their students, as this approach ensures that Promise Navigators can offer guidance from a place of understanding.
- **Resources, collaboration, and shared capacity across organizations improved student care coordination.** In Phase 1, PSTAA provided funding for 11.6 FTE student-facing positions. Additionally, cross-sector collaboration has enabled the sharing of resources and expertise.

Additional insights, including student demographics, service reach, and other key findings, are available in the full report. As a multi-year initiative spanning secondary through postsecondary education, Promise is structured to provide sustained support over time. Long-term impact cannot yet be determined based on phase one alone.

[Read full report here](#)

<https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dchs/about-king-county/about-dchs/data-reports/briefs-reports>

College persistence rates for awardees and non-award peers



Data Sources. DCHS King County Promise annual report

Highline College Summer Celebration



Phase One Lessons

Promise is a multi-year, phased strategy designed for iteration, local adaptation, and scalable impact. Its goal is to embed the most effective components into a sustainable initiative beyond PSTAA's initial investment. Below are key youth service and system-level learnings from phase one:

Strong youth service

- > **Partners developed strong cross-agency relationships that improved collaboration.** They learned that program design must stay flexible to adapt to disruptions like COVID-19 and evolving student needs, leading to adjustments in funding policies and program formats. Effective collaboration (among Promise navigators* and across organizations) also requires sufficient planning time and better alignment between resources and workload to manage capacity challenges.
- > **Engaging Opportunity Youth** requires a comprehensive, resource-intensive approach.** This population requires trust-building and holistic support for housing, childcare, and employment before academic planning. Flexible, personalized engagement and financial assistance for pre-college needs were key to overcoming barriers.
- > **Reducing barriers to funds and services is critical.** Extending grant timelines and easing eligibility requirements allowed students with complex schedules to stay engaged.
- > **Support services must acknowledge and respect young people's identities and journeys.** Culturally responsive, identity-affirming support builds community and trust—especially for youth of color—through safe spaces and relatable role models.
- > **The 2023-24 FAFSA rollout highlighted the need for individualized, family-centered support.** This new and cumbersome process highlighted the importance of strong collaboration between colleges and community partners to provide culturally relevant assistance to students and their families.

Promise Navigators*

Trained staff who provide postsecondary advising, transition support, and navigation services to students. Titles vary by partner (e.g., Advisor, Education Advocate, etc.) but roles are consistently held by case managers with training and degrees in social work, education, or related fields. Role structures may differ based on the needs of the young people served.

Partnership structure and initiative design

- > **Invest early in relationship-building and collaborative planning.** Strong partnerships require time, trust, and shared understanding—ideally established before implementation. Early staffing delays underscored the need for funders to invest in upfront planning and collaboration. Flexible timelines helped deepen engagement and improve outcomes.
- > **Proactively manage transitions for continuity.** Staffing turnover during the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted program design, strained student relationships, and slowed implementation despite adjusted timelines. These challenges highlighted the need for consistent onboarding processes across organizations. They also underscored the importance of a well-prepared backbone organization to provide sustained support and maintain continuity during staff transitions.
- > **Clarify roles and decision-making.** Early confusion between SSO and DCHS delayed progress and highlighted the need for clearer documentation and communication. Both organizations have since aligned roles and strengthened collaboration. These lessons affirm that collective impact efforts require transparent, equity-driven leadership and ongoing coordination to ensure accountability.

Opportunity Youth**

Young people in King County, ages 16 to 26, not currently enrolled in school or employed.

Next Steps

Promise's dual service models—traditional and reengagement—revealed the importance of clear roles, strong collaboration, and a shared, flexible vision. These lessons will guide future implementation and strengthen the program's foundation.

Financial constraints

To fund Promise, DCHS collects Sound Transit 3-related revenues from the Puget Sound Taxpayer Accountability Account (PSTAA), which is tied to regional construction projects. King County is projected to receive about \$318 million by 2036.

Starting in 2021, Sound Transit began revising its revenue forecasts and showing significant reductions in early-year funding. These shifts led DCHS to budget at 75% of projected revenues and to build a 25% volatility reserve for deployment during low-revenue periods. This budgeting strategy has allowed DCHS to maintain its initial programmatic investments, but has affected its ability to scale Promise investment regionally.

DCHS continuously monitors forecasts and adjusts investments as PSTAA revenues continue to fluctuate based on Sound Transit construction timelines. One such adjustment came in 2024. DCHS and the Puget Sound Educational Service District agreed to end their contract early in order to ensure that limited PSTAA funds remain focused on supporting Promise students and sustaining current partnerships.

EndNotes

1. Chu, B., Rosenblatt, N., Cooley, S., Waits, S., Granlund, C., Grubb, B., et al. (2021). *Inequity by design: How college placement policies perpetuate institutional racism*. Seattle, WA.
2. Washington Student Achievement Council (2023). *Washington State Higher Education and Labor Market*
3. Patton, D., Liu, Q., Felver, B., Lucenko, B., & Huber, A. (2016). *Opportunity Youth: Factors that predict disengagement from school and work among youth in Washington State*. Olympia, WA: Dept. Social & Health Services

Contributing DCHS Divisions

King County DCHS's Children, Youth, and Young Adult Division (CYYAD) supports youth across education, employment, and development by funding and convening partners through initiatives like PSTAA and Best Starts for Kids. Its goal is to create environments where young people thrive. DCHS's Performance Measurement and Evaluation unit equips partners with data tools to assess program implementation and impact, informing DCHS policy through collaborative insight.

625 Andover Park West, Tukwila, WA 98188
kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dchs • dchsdata@kingcounty.gov

Insights shaping the future

Promise implementation remains in its early stages, with initial successes such as improved financial aid completion rates demonstrating its potential impact. Phase 2 of implementation began in August 2024 and will span three academic years.

All Promise partners from Phase 1 have been invited and accepted the extension of their contracts. PSTAA has committed to invest approximately \$6.8 million in Phase 2 (\$3.2 million for the Promise to Community partnership and \$3.6 million for the Highline Promise partnership), which will provide a modest budget increase to account for inflation and gaps from Phase 1.

DCHS and its implementation partners have learned that role clarity, strong structures for collaboration, and orientation toward a common vision (while remaining nimble to respond to unforeseen challenges) are imperative for achieving success and will continue to work towards improvement in these areas.

Looking ahead, DCHS is evaluating resource gaps and regional collaboration. As part of this effort, it will be conducting a privately funded study of the Promise strategy. The research will assess strengths, identify improvements, and explore partnership and funding models, with findings included in a 2027 report to guide Phase 3 of implementation (starting in 2028).

Suggested citation

Makhani, H., Grife, M., Esborn, E., Cooley, S., Shultz, M., & Brooks, L. (2025). *Laying the Foundation: King County Promise Early Implementation*. DCHS CYYAD, Tukwila, WA.