



REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE HB 1835

Financial Aid Outreach and Completion Pilot

DECEMBER 2024

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	2
Executive Summary	3
Introduction	3
Legislation Implementation.....	4
Pilot expenditures.....	4
Pilot staffing.....	4
Outcomes	5
Student outreach.....	5
Financial aid completion.....	5
Completions rates and numbers.....	7
Lessons Learned.....	8
Recommendations.....	8
Conclusion.....	9
Appendix.....	10

Executive Summary

The Washington state Legislature in 2022 launched the Financial Aid Outreach and Completion Pilot Program through 2SHB 1835 to boost financial aid awareness and application completion among students. Initially focusing on the two Education Service Districts (ESDs) with the lowest financial aid completion rates from 2019 to 2021 – ESD 114 (north Olympic Peninsula and Kitsap Peninsula) and 123 (southeast Washington) – the program expanded in 2022-2023 to include ESD 113 (Capital Region).

The program employs various intervention strategies such as high-touch support, case management, and community and family engagement. Despite a temporary decline in financial aid completion rates during the 2023-2024 academic year due to a major Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) overhaul, there has been a consistent upward trend since the program's inception. Outreach specialists have increased their efforts, assisting nearly 30% more students in completing their financial aid applications within a year.

The Financial Aid Outreach Pilot Program continues to show promise in improving financial aid completion rates for Washington state students. Through 2SHB 1835, the program fosters collaboration between higher education institutions, K12 partners, and community-based organizations, aiming to close equity gaps and enhance access to postsecondary education for underserved students.

Introduction

The Financial Aid Outreach Pilot Program, initiated in fall 2022 under 2SHB 1835, targets the two Education Service Districts (ESDs) with the lowest financial aid completion rates from 2019 to 2021: ESD 114 (north Olympic Peninsula and Kitsap Peninsula) and ESD 123 (southeast Washington). ESD 114 collaborates with Olympic College and Peninsula College, while ESD 123 partners with Big Bend Community College, Columbia Basin College, and Walla Walla Community College. Supported by the Washington Student Achievement Council, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) provides ongoing training for pilot colleges, high school educators, and district staff.

In 2024, the Legislature approved expanding the pilot to ESD 113, incorporating Centralia College, Grays Harbor College, and South Puget Sound Community College, adding five new outreach specialists to support the Capital Region. The pilot focuses on financial aid completion for high school seniors, including U.S. citizens eligible for federal aid via Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and undocumented students eligible for state aid via Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA).

Outreach teams have built strong relationships with students, connecting them to college and career resources, expanding their reach by nearly 30%. Despite challenges stemming from the 2024-2025 FAFSA rollout, a Congressionally-mandated effort to simplify the application process which faced implementation issues, the pilot continues to make strides in increasing financial aid completion and supporting underserved students.

Legislation Implementation

The pilot program funding was directed by legislative mandate, requiring outreach teams to maintain a staffing ratio of one outreach staff member per 600 high school seniors. Data from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) indicated that the identified ESD regions had a total of 11,000 high school seniors, necessitating 19 outreach specialists to meet this ratio.

The fiscal note for the bill estimated that \$1,500,000 would be needed to hire the 19 outreach specialists, each with a base salary and benefits totaling \$80,000. The State Board received the full amount for fiscal year 2023, which was distributed to the pilot colleges at the start of the fiscal year in July 2022.

In July 2024, the Legislature approved an additional allocation of \$425,000 to expand the pilot to ESD 113, covering the Capital Region. Due to limited funding, only five outreach specialists were hired for three colleges, deviating from the 1:600 students to outreach specialist ratio, specified in 2HB 1835. The SBCTC and college administrators facilitated asset mapping sessions to identify needs and resources, resulting in Centralia College and Grays Harbor College receiving funding for two outreach specialists, while South Puget Sound Community College received funding for one specialist. Throughout summer 2024, colleges collaborated with ESD 113, SBCTC, and WSAC to recruit, hire, and train the new outreach specialists.

Pilot expenditures

ESD	College	Allocation	Expenditures	Remaining Balance
114	Olympic College	\$400,000.00	\$400,000.00	-
114	Peninsula College	\$240,000.00	\$240,000.00	-
123	Big Bend Community College	\$40,000	\$28,286.23	\$11,713.77
123	Columbia Basin College	\$660,000.00	\$195,768.60	\$261,666.55
123	Walla Walla Community College	\$160,000.00	\$80,151.80	\$79,848.20
113	Centralia College	\$170,000.00	-	\$170,000.00
113	Grays Harbor College	\$170,000.00	\$29,903.46	\$140,096.54
113	South Puget Sound Community College	\$85,000.00	-	\$85,000.00

Pilot staffing

ESD	College	Staff	Position(s)
114	Olympic College	5	1 Assistant Director, 4 Outreach Specialists
114	Peninsula College	3	3 Outreach Specialists
123	Big Bend Community College	1	1 Outreach Specialist
123	Columbia Basin College	8	1 Assistant Manager, 7 Outreach Specialists
123	Walla Walla Community College	2	2 Financial Aid Outreach Specialists
113	Centralia College	2	2 Financial Aid Outreach Specialists
113	Grays Harbor College	2	2 Financial Aid Outreach Specialists
113	South Puget Sound Community College	1	1 Financial Aid Outreach Specialist

Outcomes

The outcomes data reported below does not account for the recent expansion into ESD 113 because the new colleges are still integrating outreach specialists into high schools. All expansion figures will be included in the 2025 report to the Legislature.

Student outreach

Since the pilot's launch in 2022-2023, outreach teams have continued to provide direct support to students. Across both regions, the pilot supported a total of 7,240 students, including 5,515 seniors. While the primary focus remained on seniors, outreach teams also extended their support to juniors, sophomores, family members, and community members. Outreach specialists engaged students through one-on-one sessions, financial aid workshops, and presentations.

During the 2023-2024 academic year, the number of students served rose to 10,089 from 7,240 the previous year, marking a 29% increase in financial aid completion support. This highlights the program's expanding impact and reach.

2022-2023 student outreach

Region	College	Year	Seniors Served	Students Served
ESD114	Olympic College	2022-23	1,117	2,886
ESD114	Peninsula College	2022-23	403	703
ESD123	Big Bend Community College	2022-23	67	87
ESD123	Columbia Basin College	2022-23	2,453	2,453
ESD123	Walla Walla Community College	2022-23	1,111	1,111
			Total: 5,151	Total: 7,240

2023-2024 student outreach

Region	College	Year	Seniors Served	Students Served
ESD114	Olympic College	2023-24	2,386	4,361
ESD114	Peninsula College	2023-24	450	750
ESD123	Big Bend Community College	2023-24	104	146
ESD123	Columbia Basin College	2023-24	3549	3549
ESD123	Walla Walla Community College	2023-24	1283	1283
			Total: 7,772	Total: 10,089

Financial aid completion

While the first year of the outreach pilot program showed an increase in financial aid application completion rates, the second year did not yield similar results due to the problematic federal rollout of the FAFSA. This rollout introduced additional barriers and unexpected challenges that significantly impacted outreach strategies in the pilot regions. Despite these setbacks, the program continues to

adapt and strive towards its goal of increasing financial aid completion rates.

2024-2025 FAFSA rollout challenges

The U.S. Department of Education introduced a revised FAFSA in the last days of December 2023, nearly three months later than the form's usual open date. While the rollout fulfilled the Congressionally-mandated deadline for the form's release, students, families, and colleges continued to face significant challenges for much of the first half of 2024. This section highlights some of those challenges and the ways in which pilot program outreach specialists navigated them to continue to assist students.

Washington Student Achievement Council portal

Outreach specialists use the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) Financial Aid Portal to access state financial aid completion data, including school-level FAFSA data. This access allows them to prioritize outreach strategies effectively. However, the launch of the new FAFSA brought restrictions to the portal, governed by an agreement between state higher education agencies and the U.S. Department of Education. Initially, the updated agreement for the 2024-2025 FAFSA did not permit sharing FAFSA completion status with entities outside of schools, leaving outreach specialists without vital information about student FAFSA completion rates.

In spring and early summer 2024, the U.S. Department of Education revised the agreement to allow expanded sharing of completion status data and contracting for FAFSA completion work. This change enabled data-sharing agreements with community organizations and others providing FAFSA completion support, allowing them access to the WSAC FAFSA completion portal.

Climate

The overall climate in high schools and communities reflected a belief that completing the FAFSA was not worth the effort, particularly among students from mixed-status families who felt targeted and unsupported. Outreach specialists and students reported spending hours on phone calls to the U.S. Department of Education, often receiving incorrect or unhelpful information. This led outreach specialists to provide more one-on-one services to encourage persistence in completing the FAFSA.

For many WASFA-eligible students, the uncertainty surrounding the FAFSA timeline created significant stress about securing financial aid in time for the start of the term. This stress was compounded by fears that their funding would not be processed quickly enough to meet critical deadlines. Despite colleges' efforts to support WASFA students during the FAFSA delay, national media coverage and growing fears about securing financial resources created significant hesitancy among these students. The confusion surrounding the FAFSA delay led to concerns that the WASFA process might also be delayed, causing further reluctance to engage in the application process.

Financial aid processing and awards

In addition to challenges with overall financial aid completion, colleges and universities nationwide faced several obstacles in processing and awarding aid once applications were completed:

- Late release of the FAFSA form: The 2024-2025 FAFSA was released in December 31, 2023, almost three months later than the usual October 1 release date. This delay pushed back the entire timeline for students to complete the form and for colleges to process the data.
- Technical glitches and errors: The new FAFSA form experienced various technical issues,

including problems with online submission and inaccuracies in the student aid index calculations. These glitches required corrections and reprocessing, further delaying the timeline for aid to be awarded.

- Batch corrections functionality: The batch corrections functionality, which allows for bulk processing of FAFSA data, was not available immediately upon the form's release. This lack of functionality meant that colleges had to process data manually, slowing down the overall process.

Completions rates and numbers

Before reviewing the updated financial aid completion numbers for FAFSA and WASFA, it is important to highlight the following key points:

- Last year's FAFSA completion rate decreased to 43% from 48% in 2022-2023. However, there is a notable upward trend compared to the 2021-2022 pre-pilot data. These percentages align with national trends following the federal rollout of the new FAFSA.
- WSAC does not provide or publish completion rate data, only counts, for WASFA applications to ensure the identities of undocumented students and families remain protected.
- Per WSAC's updated policies, important changes to the 2023-2024 data are listed below:
 - Per WSAC's data suppression policy, FAFSA completion rates have been suppressed where the denominator is less than 20, rates are rounded, and headcounts are not shared. WASFA counts of less than 10 have also been suppressed.
 - WASFA counts are limited to likely high school seniors (first-time filers and freshmen who have never enrolled). Last year, counts were inflated as they were not isolated to likely high school seniors.
 - WASFA counts for Peninsula College erroneously included Pierce County data due to an online school coding issue, which has been corrected.
 - WASFA records for 2021-2022 were deduplicated incorrectly, resulting in lower counts than those for 2022-2023. This issue has been corrected.

2021-2022 completion data (pre-outreach interventions)

Region	College	FAFSA Completion Rate	WASFA Completion Count
ESD114	Olympic College	41%	20
ESD114	Peninsula College	33%	N<10
ESD123	Big Bend Community College	46%	75
ESD123	Columbia Basin College	43%	111
ESD123	Walla Walla Community College	51%	20
			Total: 226

2022-2023 completion data

Region	College	FAFSA Completion Rate	WASFA Completion Count
ESD114	Olympic College	45%	20
ESD114	Peninsula College	36%	N<10
ESD123	Big Bend Community College	54%	75
ESD123	Columbia Basin College	50%	111
ESD123	Walla Walla Community College	56%	20
			Total: 226

2023-2024 completion data

Region	College	FAFSA Completion Rate	WASFA Completion Count
ESD114	Olympic College	41%	16
ESD114	Peninsula College	32%	N<10
ESD123	Big Bend Community College	43%	70
ESD123	Columbia Basin College	46%	80
ESD123	Walla Walla Community College	45%	26
			Total: 192

Lessons Learned

- The pilot program has only been operational for two years, and SBCTC, in partnership with WSAC, is still refining data reporting processes, as reflected above.
- Different regions have varying approaches and definitions of embedding outreach specialists in high schools. Some outreach specialists have full access to the high school computer network, email, designated office space, and the authority to pull students out of classes for financial aid advising sessions. Others face inconsistent access and limited authority, hindering their outreach efforts.
- Not all district staff and high schools are aware of the pilot program, indicating a need for a statewide awareness effort. Tracking students outside of the portal also remains a challenge. Despite these obstacles, the program continues to adapt and strive towards its goals.

Recommendations

- Enhance awareness and relationships: Increase awareness of the pilot program through strengthened relationships with schools and community partners. Enhanced marketing and promotion at all levels would further support these relationships.
- Ensure accountability: High school districts should ensure that outreach specialists have

access to all necessary resources to support students. This includes network access, district email, designated office space, and permission to pull students out of class when appropriate.

- Develop memorandums of understanding: Colleges and school districts/high schools should develop memorandums of understanding to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of all parties. This will ensure that outreach specialists can effectively perform their duties within high schools.
- Invest in a comprehensive tracking system: Outside of WSAC's FAFSA portal and monthly WASFA data updates, all other data, such as outreach efforts and student engagement, were tracked manually by the pilot colleges using Excel or Google Sheets. This manual tracking requires significant work and can lead to data inconsistencies. Investing in a tracking system compatible with ctcLink, the community and technical college's ERP software system, could more accurately track data and effectively support the pilot.

Conclusion

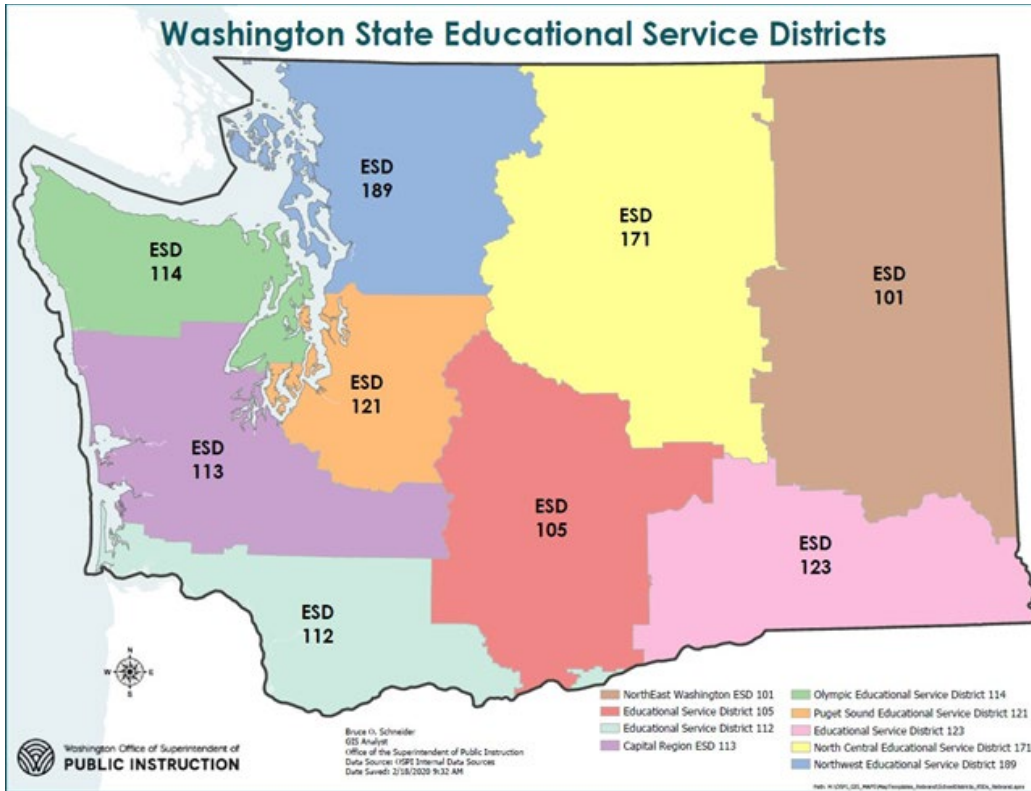
Despite significant challenges due to the difficult FAFSA rollout, outreach teams at five pilot colleges – Big Bend Community College, Columbia Basin College, Olympic College, Peninsula College, and Walla Walla Community College – along with their partners (Educational Service Districts 114 and 123, the Washington Student Achievement Council and community-based organizations) successfully built relationships with students and served them effectively. College staff served 29% more students compared to the 2022-2023 academic year, despite the barriers imposed.

Outreach specialists have continued to build trust and rapport with students, families, and high schools. The increasingly positive view of outreach teams as trusted messengers, educators, and advocates is evident in the numbers of students served. While financial aid completion numbers fell during the 2023-2024 academic year because of the problematic FAFSA rollout, this program still has the potential to increase financial aid completion rates for Washington state.

The State Board for Community and Technical Colleges looks forward to reporting on the ESD 113 expansion in the 2025 legislative report. Additionally, State Board staff are encouraged by the determination and tenacity of these pilot colleges and their willingness to go above and beyond to serve Washington's most vulnerable student populations, ensuring all students have access to post-secondary education and the necessary resources and tools to complete a postsecondary credential.

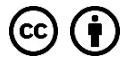
Appendix

1. Educational Service District map



2. The following table shows the pilot Educational Service Districts 114 and 123, counties, number of schools served, and number of school districts served. To ensure accuracy, ESD 113 will be added to the 2025 report when outreach staff are fully embedded.

ESD	County	Schools	Districts
114	Clallam	13	5
114	Jefferson	5	3
114	Kitsap	16	4
114	Mason	3	3
123	Adams	3	1
123	Asotin	2	2
123	Benton	19	5
123	Columbia	1	1
123	Franklin	8	3
123	Garfield	1	1
123	Walla Walla	11	5



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Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges