Limitless Possibilities

Leveraging Cross-Sector Partnerships to Design Equitable Postsecondary Transitions

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Introduction

Across the early childhood education to workforce sectors, district and system leaders, educators and their partners work tirelessly to respond to and address the needs and desires of a rapidly diversifying student population. At a time when perceptions of the value of postsecondary education continue to decline,[1] PK12, higher education and workforce partners must collaborate and strengthen transitions from high school to postsecondary opportunities. Practitioners[2] play a critical role in developing a strategic vision and implementing programs to support students, families and their communities in navigating college and career pathways. These practitioner-leaders wear multiple hats, juggle complex priorities and navigate challenging resourcing constraints. They also seek professional learning opportunities to deepen their collaboration skills, accelerate peer-to-peer learning and elevate resources and effective practices.

Learning networks mobilize learning and foster a collaborative problem-solving culture across professional communities. These networks and communities of practice provide education-sector leaders with opportunities to:

■ Learn from field leaders about emerging best practices.

■ Cultivate a network of peers facing similar challenges.

■ Reflect on the technical as well as adaptive problems they navigate day-to-day.

In incubating, launching and managing the first year of the Limitless Learning Network in Washington state, Education First observed these principles in action and helped create space where these principles were realized.


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1   Nguyen, S., Fishman, R., & Cheche, O. (2024).
2   Practitioner-leaders include, but are not limited to, college and career readiness district directors, CTE Directors, advising professionals, higher education enrollment staff and leaders of community-based or nonprofit organizations that support postsecondary transitions.

The Opportunity in Washington State

In Washington state, higher education enrollment gaps existed before the pandemic—and enrollment decline accelerated because of the uncertainty COVID-19 wreaked on education systems. The state offers one of the most generous state-based aid programs in the country; its Washington College Grant program is the first and only state aid program to provide over $2,000 in support to qualifying full-time undergraduate students.[3] And yet, the state consistently ranks in the bottom percentiles for FAFSA completion and postsecondary enrollment.[4] This trend in the data is alarming as many studies have found that postsecondary education is tied to a number of lifelong outcomes. Supporting students to pursue and attain postsecondary degrees, credentials and other opportunities is one of the most effective ways for students to increase their economic mobility and earn sustaining wages.

MEDIAN EARNINGS OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES AFTER GRADUATION
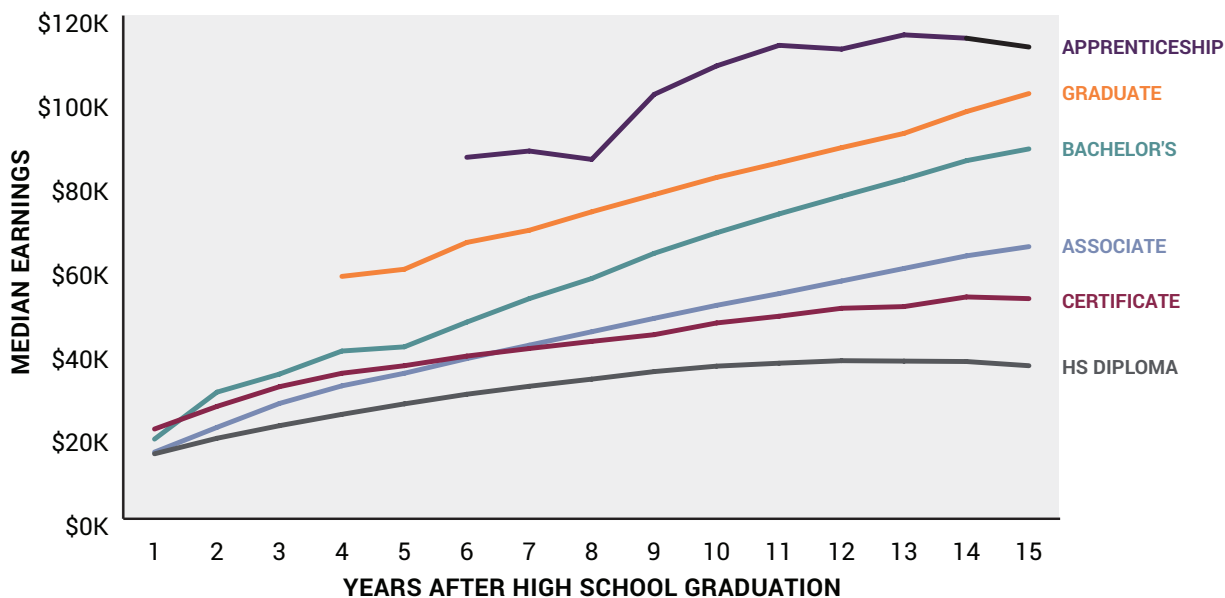
Source: Washington State Education Research and Data Center (ERDC)

Postsecondary Transitions in Washington, by the Numbers

State outcomes data tell an important story to education and workforce leaders about the necessity of deeper collaboration to support Washington's students.

- Just 50 percent of Washington high school graduates of the Class of 2021 enrolled in a postsecondary program right after high school—lower than the national average of 63 percent for the Class of 2020.

- Data from the National Student Clearinghouse[5] indicated that postsecondary enrollment decreased 10.7 percent in Washington between spring 2020 and spring 2022, whereas nationally, postsecondary enrollment declined by 7.4 percent over the same period.

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3   Washington Student Achievement Council. (2024, January 29).

4   Gates Foundation. (2023, April).

5   National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (n.d.).

- The Washington State Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) published data regarding the lifelong impact of postsecondary credential attainment on the median earnings for students—in initial wages and longer-term earnings.[6] ERDC also found significant equity gaps in median earnings for graduates across race and ethnicity subgroups.[7]

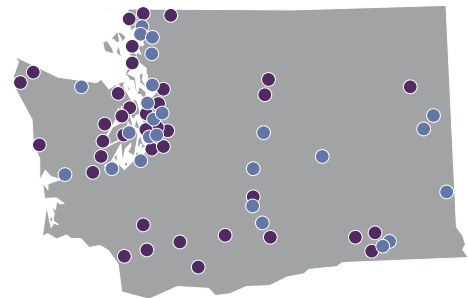Enrollment and earnings data are just one source of evidence that compelled the formation of the Limitless Learning Network. To center the voices, desires and needs of students, families, educators and community-based organizations, Education First also engaged stakeholders to learn from individuals' experiences with college and career transitions in Washington state. Both practitioners and those most proximate stated a desire to be centered in designing solutions to help bridge the state's postsecondary education gaps.

Formation of the Network

To address postsecondary enrollment gaps in its home state, the Gates Foundation's Washington State Initiative (WSI) team made a significant investment to launch the Limitless Learning Network.[8] The Network's vision is to deepen partnership capacity within and across state regions and focus on mobilizing knowledge and implementing strategies to support high school to postsecondary transitions. For our partners at the Gates Foundation, this investment was an opportunity to live into their place-based funding beliefs and values by centering proximate leaders in designing solutions within their regional communities.[9]

LIMITLESS LEARNING NETWORK

● K12 school districts   ● Higher education institutions

In incubating and launching the Limitless Learning Network, the Education First team drew from our deep knowledge of Washington state and postsecondary transitions, a commitment to driving coherence across multi-sector partnerships and a strong track record of incubating networks and new organizations.[10] As a result of stakeholder engagement conducted in the state, we centered co-design to ensure that Limitless was driven by and responsive to partnerships' feedback, cultivating a collaborative community of practitioner-leaders focused on increasing postsecondary enrollment.

6   Washington State Education Research and Data Center. (n.d.).
7   Ibid.
8   Gates Foundation. (2023, June).
9   Education First. (2022).
10 Gates Foundation. (2024).

Limitless Partnership Characteristics

To bridge the gaps between systems, our Request for Proposals (RFP) required prospective partnerships to include **at minimum one district and one higher education partner.** While formal or informal collaboration may have existed between the institutions represented prior to applying for this opportunity, for many partnerships this was the first time this set of practioner-leaders were working together. Limitless was designed to center practitioner-leaders as the drivers of these cross-sector partnerships, empowering community-driven strategies rather than top-down solutions. We believe that practitioner-leaders are well-positioned to influence systems change as individuals who:

- Are proximate to students, families and communities.

- Possess deep knowledge of opportunities and challenges within and across their institutions.

- Have positional power, decision-making authority or the ability to influence system-level policy and/or program implementation.

We encouraged applicants to the Network to consider including additional regional organizations who could play critical roles in driving outcomes to support youth, which led to many partnerships being inclusive of community-based organizations, workforce partners, Educational Services Districts (ESDs) and library systems. Through our RFP, we identified

26 partnerships[11] representing 21 of Washington's 39 counties, collectively serving 28 percent of all high school students in the state across rural and urban regions.

Commitment to Advancing Equity

The Limitless Learning Network centers targeted universalism as a key approach to increase equitable outcomes for the state's learners. Targeted universalism, a framework developed by john a. powell, posits that we must set universal goals—and then design and implement culturally responsive, targeted strategies to support subpopulations in reaching those goals.[12] While the goal of Limitless is to increase postsecondary enrollment for all students, partnerships across the network are targeting strategies to one or more of the following populations: Black or African American students; Hispanic or Latino/a/x students; Asian or Asian American and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students; students who are Indigenous, Native, and Members of Tribal Nations; students from rural communities; students from low-income backgrounds; and immigrant and newcomer students or students in mixed-status households. Serving these diverse and varied student populations across the state's urban centers and broad rural regions is crucial, so we asked cross-sector partnerships to continually reflect on their equity commitments to ensure alignment between strategies they were implementing and their local communities' needs and desires.

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11 For a list of participating partnerships in the Limitless Learning Network, see Appendix on page 23.

12 powell, j.a., Menendian, S., & Ake, W. (2019).

Three Pillars for Impact

In support of increasing postsecondary enrollment in the state, we identified three pillars for impact to ground the Limitless Learning Network's activities and each of the 26 partnerships' annual goals:

Increase awareness and enhance the capability of practitioner-leaders to implement strategies supporting students' transition from high school to postsecondary education, with a focus on closing equity gaps.

Improve partnership capacities to drive cross-system engagement, action and outcomes within their region and support scaling in the long term across Washington state.

Improve data capacity for increased access to and use of high school to postsecondary data among participating Learning Network members and the partnerships.

To accelerate learning around these three pillars, Education First designed Network structures that would facilitate intra- and inter-partnership sharing of best practices as well as a framework for centering equity in discussions and the adoption of strategies to narrow gaps in the state's postsecondary enrollment. We also introduced a constellation of partners[13] including technical assistance (TA) providers, state agency leads and national thought leaders. These partners provided deep expertise aligned to the Network's three pillars for impact through the facilitation of breakout learning sessions and 1:1 thought partnership.

PURPOSE OF THIS CASE STUDY

In authoring this case study, the Education First team reflects on our role as the inaugural Network Manager in incubating and launching this community of practice as well as the Limitless Learning Network's initial impact and promise in driving a significant long-term increase in postsecondary enrollment in Washington state. In this case study, we reflect on effective structures and commitments we upheld in the first year of Limitless that may be replicable in other learning communities. We also uplift key partnership and data capacities that are critical to the success of cross-sector partnerships. Finally, we are excited to celebrate the promising practices emerging from the 26 partnerships engaged in Limitless in the form of real-world vignettes. We hope these bright spots from Washington state can be useful to leaders facing similar challenges in bridging the gap between high school, postsecondary education and workforce across the country.

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13   For a list of Network TA providers and other support partners, see Appendix on page 25.

Networks as Catalysts for Change

For cross-sector partnerships to succeed in driving systems change, they must possess a deep understanding of the problems they seek to solve, cultivate buy-in from key partners and secure other enabling conditions that will drive their ability to advance solutions. In their onboarding to Limitless, we encouraged the 26 partnerships to "go slow to go far" by taking stock of their regional context, strengthening their partnership capacity and developing a clear, shared vision before diving into the development and advancement of new postsecondary enrollment strategies.

Four Pieces of Effective Networks

To build alignment within and across these cross-sector regional partnerships, we designed Limitless with a focus on four elements of effective networks as articulated in the Education Network Taxonomy developed by the foundation. In this framework, Networks that effectively accelerate learning, innovation and the adoption of solutions do so by (1) identifying the right problems with (2) the right people and organizations in the room by (3) developing a rigorous plan of action and (4) supporting infrastructure and culture.[14] With funding from the Gates Foundation's WSI team and ongoing partnership with state agency leaders, we cultivated enabling conditions that can catalyze partnership and innovation across the Network and within each regional partnership.

The right problem	A rigorous plan of action
The right people & organizations in the room	Supporting infrastructure & culture

Source: Gates Foundation, Education Network Taxonomy

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14 Gates Foundation. (2018).

Addressing Technical and Adaptive Problems

To drive transformative change and address technical and adaptive problems in Washington state's high school to postsecondary education ecosystem, Limitless provides space for workshopping, problem-solving and resource-sharing.[15] We framed the Network as a space to mobilize learning and reflection about the strategies and solutions embedded in education leaders' work and the complex interpersonal and interorganizational challenges that must be addressed to work across fragmented systems. We steeped the Network's learning in core concepts of systems change by supporting partnerships in identifying root causes of issues in order to transform structures, customs, mindsets, power dynamics and policies. Limitless members engaged with frameworks, including The Water of Systems Change[16] and the Coherence Framework,[17] to consider ways in which rushing to solutions can fail to solve systemic problems and often create incoherence while reinforcing existing mental models and structural harms.

Through Limitless convenings, virtual sessions and office hours that provided partnership-specific coaching, we supported these practitioner-leaders in ongoing reflection on their personal and organizational visions for improved access and outcomes for students transitioning into postsecondary education. Reflective activities, such as a SOAR analysis to codify the

strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results present within each partnership, and quarterly check-in calls, ongoing goal setting and reflection and partnership capacity TA allowed us to observe the ways in which Limitless partnerships engaged in various stages of effective teaming.

Co-Designing the Network's Shared Equity Commitments

Education First employed an equitable design process and developed a collective, living Equity Framework[18] directly informed by our Network members, which grounded Limitless in a collective understanding of and commitment to equity principles. During a Network-wide workshopping session, we drafted and refined a guiding document organized around three equity principles. As a direct response to Network members' desires for an actionable resource, the revised Equity Framework includes reflection questions aligned to each equity principle. We encourage individuals and their partnership teams to grapple with these questions to ensure that their actions are living into their commitments, which include:

- Engaging communities to elevate the voices of the students, families and educators most proximate to the problems they seek to solve.

- Using data-informed practices to address root causes that have historically driven inequity in access to postsecondary education and to ensure educational experiences are high quality and meaningful.

- Developing equitable, inclusive and responsive strategies by working alongside the communities who will be most impacted.

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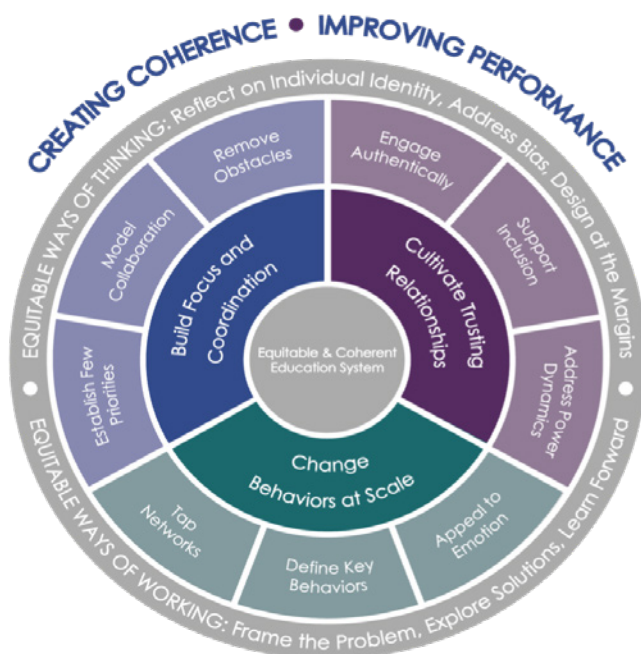
15 Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009).

16 Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018).

17 The Coherence Lab. (n.d.-a). .

18 To review the Network's Equity Framework, see here.

Mobilizing Knowledge Across Regions

A key feature of Limitless—and other learning networks—is the ability to spotlight promising practices implemented by local leaders and provide Network members with an opportunity to consider implications for their own context. This feature helps mobilize relevant solutions across a learning community while allowing peers to explore the processes utilized to identify, implement and adjust targeted strategies to best suit their student communities. Members of the Network appreciated learning from peers, citing their desire to replicate what has been effective for others rather than reinventing the wheel. Learning networks can leverage formal and informal peer-to-peer learning to center the deeply held expertise of their members.

Regional Storytelling and Spotlights

We designed early networking activities (e.g., "Promising Practices Blitz") that allowed Network members to convene for informal storytelling and sharing of various artifacts and proof points showcasing their work and its impact. Hoping to build on the excitement and enthusiasm from this initial peer-learning, we then invited individuals in the Network to present in breakout discussions during virtual sessions and future convenings. In the first year, we held over a dozen learning sessions that spotlighted emerging and established practices and featured stories of regional educators, practitioners, students and community members. In our convenings, we developed panels and other programs to spotlight regional priorities and cross-sector partnerships around workforce development and programs that centered student voices and experiences.

Problem-Solving and the Formation of Working Groups

In addition to formal learning activities that put promising practices "onstage" in Network-wide convenings and virtual sessions, Limitless offered opportunities to build connections across subsets of likeminded peers and organizations working to address similar challenges related to postsecondary enrollment. Problem of Practice consultancies and flexible Unconference sessions provided space for peers in the Network to workshop and solve problems together.

We also incubated and launched working groups around six topics to share resources and deepen knowledge on promising practices in smaller settings for others to learn from, adopt or refine for their individual regional contexts. In some cases, Working Groups are also working together to develop new strategies or resources. Working groups are an emerging strategy in Limitless but have the potential to advance solutions to increase postsecondary enrollment in meaningful ways. In Education First's work leading other communities of practice, we have found that strong project management and TA leadership can support working groups in deepening and applying their learning. These smaller cross-partnership spaces can also be effective by providing a collaborative workshopping space for adaptive problems such as addressing roadblocks to regional partnerships' work. Working groups can also provide support systems and thought partnership to practitioner-leaders who functionally operate as a team of one in their local contexts.

INITIAL LIMITLESS WORKING GROUPS

Listed below are the initial set of Working Groups that formed as part of the Limitless Network Working Groups:

- College-Going Family Workshops
- Financial Aid Strategies
- Leveraging Data for Postsecondary Transitions
- Student Engagement
- Regional Partnership Capacity Building (with a focus on WhatComm & Skagit Counties)
- Career Connected Learning

> " When you get this many people who are engaging and motivated towards positive change, magic can happen organically. Having the areas of focus and small community sections allows us to facilitate getting the work done. "
>
> —*Network Member, April 2024*

Partnership and Data Capacity

Two of the Network's pillars for impact focus on the development of stronger regional capacity among leaders and systems to drive and sustain impact.

- **Improving partnership capacities** to drive cross-system engagement, action and outcomes within their region and support scaling in the long term across Washington state.

- **Improving data capacity** for increased access to and use of high school to postsecondary data among participating Learning Network members and the partnerships.

The ongoing cultivation of partnership and data capacity should be considered side by side as mutually reinforcing strategies that support continuous improvement and innovation.

Supporting the Development of Cross-Sector Partnerships

Across the 26 partnerships that make up the Limitless Network, we saw evidence of the formation of brand-new cross-sector partnerships and the fortification of established institutional partnerships. The strongest partnerships were thoughtful and committed to:

- Developing and committing action to a set of shared goals.

- Bringing leadership across institutions and sectors into alignment.

- Identifying and securing funding to sustain their work.

- Reflecting on and centering a commitment to racial equity.

Learning networks can support effective partnerships by providing structure for practitioner-leaders to engage in ongoing reflection on their personal and organizational visions. Education First supported each Limitless team in developing a shared vision for cross-sector collaboration within their regions to increase access, enrollment and outcomes for students transitioning into postsecondary education. To scaffold this partnership capacity-building, we provided **resources, infrastructure and responsive TA** to support Network members in deepening regional collaboration.

LEARNING NETWORKS CAN SUPPORT PARTNERSHIP CAPACITY-BUILDING BY PROVIDING…

RESOURCES	TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE
■ Worksheets and tools *(e.g. digital workbook for partners' goal setting, partnership capacity self-assessment)* ■ Equity Framework ■ Protocols *(e.g., consultancies, discussion questions)*	■ 1:1 support and TA ■ Facilitated full or small group learning ■ Quarterly check-in calls and office hours

Assessing Existing Collaboration

Strengthening partnerships across sectors requires acknowledgment of the starting point and any existing collaboration between institutions and teams. In Limitless, we often observed that organizations had formal or informal ways of coordinating prior to the launch of the Network. Often, the senior leadership of different educational institutions engaged in regional meetings, or practitioner-leaders collaborated on distinct activities. However, to build more intentional partnerships and transform local systems, Education First leveraged the Coherence Framework. The Collaboration Continuum (shown below) supports partnerships in assessing the nature of their existing collaboration on a spectrum from competing to truly collaborating.[19]

COLLABORATION CONTINUUM

| COMPETE | CO-EXIST | COMMUNICATE | COORDINATE | COLLABORATE |

Source: The Coherence Lab

Mindsets, Reflections and Relationship-Building

Complex cross-sector challenges drive inequity in postsecondary enrollment. System leaders should remember that the work starts within individuals, who in turn influence and shift organizations.

As of March 2024, when Network members completed their baseline survey, half of respondents reported they have held "conversations about how their work can increase equity in their region and have identified inequitable practices." These reflective conversations lay a critical foundation for partnerships to identify and implement solutions and strategies that dismantle structural inequity within their educational systems.

> " The [Moving Upstream] activity was so powerful for me! Very few times do you have the opportunity to share and dive deep into your experience with college or academics. Reminded me of many barriers that students face to this day but possibly go unnoticed due to other bigger barriers. "
>
> *—Network Member, April 2024*

> " The connections and trust we are building as a team are really amazing. The network we are building across the state will be so beneficial as we move this work forward. "
>
> *—Network Member, March 2024*

Grappling With Upstream and Downstream Thinking

Education First partnered with George Zeno of New Creole to engage the Network in a partnership capacity-building exercise that would identify the systemic barriers limiting access into postsecondary opportunities. Limitless teams reflected on the intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community and public policy factors that impacted their own journeys and those of their current students. This exercise encouraged Network members to locate themselves as individual leaders within the complex systems they inhabit and prompted them to reflect on their lived experiences, identities and personal journeys through education systems. As a result of this exercise, partnership team members engaged in dialogue about the ways in which their own experiences created biases and mindsets that color their perceptions when collaborating across institutions.

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19   The Coherence Lab. (n.d.-b).

Infrastructure: Meetings, People Capacity and Role Clarity

Establishing partnership infrastructure is an essential driver of an effective cross-sector partnership. This includes a partnership's ability to create a regular meeting cadence, set expectations and define roles. While Network-wide convenings and virtual sessions can offer time for partnership teams to connect, reflect and identify next steps, those spaces alone will not drive meaningful systems change. Some of the strongest partnership teams we observed were those that continued to meet regularly and ground their regional work in Limitless goals and reflections in between our Network-wide convenings.

Cultivating Coherence Through Strategic Prioritization

The concept of innovation can evoke ideas of additional programs and strategies on top of an already cluttered outreach and events calendar that practitioner-leaders oversee. To support Limitless partnerships in focusing their efforts on fewer but more intentional programs that are manageable for the current resourcing on their teams, Education First introduced another Coherence Framework tool: the Initiative Inventory.[20] This tool supports teams in reducing their overall number of priorities to more effectively meet a narrower set of objectives, which Network members found to be a useful exercise that validates the real constraints of their limited capacity.

Data Fluency, Sharing and Application

Practitioner-leaders must be fluent in working with and understanding program and outcomes data. This fluency helps leaders understand students' learning outcomes and needs, which will inform their implementation of new, responsive strategies. To support postsecondary transitions in Washington state, Network members must work with a range of datasets—including student enrollment and workforce data—as well as qualitative data (e.g., surveys, focus group and other informal feedback/testimonies) to understand the nuances of students' experiences. We considered several needs with respect to building data capacity within the Limitless Learning Network:

- Fostering awareness about existing and available data.

- Addressing barriers to access and the sharing of data across partnerships.

- Building data-driven decision-making capacity among education leaders so that insights are applicable to strategies and programs being developed.

During its first year, Washington STEM (WA STEM) was a key partner in building data capacity within Limitless. Serving as a TA provider, WA STEM created and shared resources for Network-wide learning, including developing a high school to postsecondary data toolkit, providing direct support to introduce practitioners to data dashboards and open-source tools and convening a data capacity working group. WA STEM introduced its Data-driven Decision-Making (DDDM) Framework to support regional partnerships in understanding the root causes driving their postsecondary enrollment gaps. This tool offered educators and system leaders a framework to test assumptions about programs and strategies that target best-fit solutions to the communities they serve. Using this tool, Limitless Network members were also encouraged to identify what additional data they might need to collect to drive informed decision-making in their cross-sector partnerships, including quantitative and qualitative data sources that shed light on students' experiences and systemic barriers they may be navigating.

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20   The Coherence Lab. (n.d.-b).

SPOKANE PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Data-Sharing Agreement

Many teams in the Limitless Learning Network looked to establish data-sharing agreements (DSAs) or memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with their regional partners for flow of critical data and insights across institutions. The partnership between Spokane Public Schools (SPS) and the Community College of Spokane (CCS) system played an important role in mobilizing knowledge about cross-sector data infrastructure. This partnership drew from their experience to create a DSA between SPS and CCS, sharing technical guidance and lessons learned directly with other Limitless teams and in conversations within the Network's data capacity working group.

Forging Data-Driven Partnerships in the Yakima Valley

One example of how cross-sector partnerships have aligned their day-to-day work to a shared vision for stronger postsecondary transitions comes from the collaboration in the Yakima Valley in the South-Central region of the state. Two Limitless partnerships committed time and resources to connect leaders from Yakima School District, Central Washington University, Educational Service District 105 and the College Success Foundation for an in-person data deep dive. In an end-of-year grant report, one partnership reflected on this opportunity as "encouraging deeper collaboration and allowing participants to engage more meaningfully with the data that informs our work. This [deep dive] not only clarified some of our priorities but also underscored the value of cross-project engagement as a strategy for aligning efforts and building stronger partnerships." In addition to reviewing quantitative data, partners are also centering student voice to identify and begin to remove barriers to postsecondary transitions.

Strategies and Solutions Implemented Across Partnerships

Because increasing postsecondary enrollment is a broad charge, Limitless partnerships explored many strategic levers in the first year to strengthen outcomes for Washington's students after high school graduation. The next section of this case study offers examples of how the practitioner-leaders in the Network are putting emergent learning into practice in their local contexts.

Centering Students and Families

In Limitless, both K12 and higher education educators and leaders have consistently sought steep learning and reflection in the needs and desires of students and families. Since the beginning, Network members have elevated the voices of the communities they serve in myriad ways by sharing the strategies and solutions they explored and implemented.

With expertise in centering community voice, Scholar Fund serves as TA provider, supporting the mobilization of knowledge of student- and family-centered engagement strategies. Scholar Fund convenes a working group that has discussed frameworks such as the Ladder of Youth Engagement[21] and engaged in direct learning from a guest speaker series that spotlights students' and recent graduates' experiences. Another Limitless working group is focused on family engagement and is developing a set of resources that allow state K12 and higher education partners to convene families for workshops that support increasing student enrollment, particularly first-generation students or students whose families may include newcomers, recent migrants, mixed-status citizenship or low-income households.

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21   Hart, R.A. (1992).

EMPATHY INTERVIEWS
Listen Like Our Lives Depend on It

Geneva Wiki of the Aspen Institute spoke at a keynote session developed for Limitless.[22] Geneva introduced critical scholarship and evidence on the importance of cultivating belonging, meaning, well-being and purpose (BMWP) and the lifelong impact that reaffirmation and supportive youth engagement can have. She conducted a live empathy interview with a student from Clark College in which she modeled de-centering adult egos, radically listening "as if our lives depend on it" and believing in our young people. In this exercise, the student shared her experience navigating a nontraditional high school to postsecondary transition. The Network listened to learn, honoring the roadblocks, curiosity and bravery the student shared.

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING ENGAGEMENT
of Native, Indigenous and Tribal Students

One Limitless partnership hopes to disrupt harmful policies and legacies in educational systems that have sought to eliminate Native identities and ways of thinking. Partners working in Tribal Relations and Native Education roles at Gonzaga University and Spokane Public Schools have convened their cross-sector partnership to provide culturally sustaining engagement to students who identify as Indigenous, Native American and members of Tribal Nations. This partnership shared that conducting interviews taking into consideration the experiences of current Native colleges students "greatly enriched our programming, ensuring it is relevant and supportive, ultimately fostering better transitions for Native students into postsecondary education." An example of this impact in action includes a three-day immersive experience at Gonzaga University with Native high school students participating in classes, meeting peers and engaging with Native adults who serve as faculty and chaperones.

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22   Aspen Institute. (n.d.).

Financial Aid Strategies and FAFSA/WASFA Completion

Another critical lever to improve postsecondary transitions is to proactively connect students and families to financial aid strategies that explain available resources and real costs of postsecondary opportunities. The Limitless Learning Network benefits from the national expertise provided by our financial aid TA provider, uAspire, and their close collaboration with a state agency, the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC). Over the first year of the Network, uAspire and WSAC developed responsive trainings and support for K12 and higher education leaders navigating the Better FAFSA rollout, which created uncertainty and roadblocks.[23] uAspire offered ad hoc webinars and detailed TA and guidance and convened spaces for reflection and resource-sharing within the Network. WSAC supported learning around state-based aid strategies involving WASFA completion and provided guidance on how to best support mixed-status families.

Leveraging Libraries and Community Spaces

Meetings with students and families should occur in psychologically safe, culturally relevant environments, and cross-sector partnerships can leverage community spaces other than the high school or college campus. One Limitless team has centered their local library system as a key actor to increase postsecondary transitions across a broad geographical region serving Snohomish and Island counties. Sno-Isles Libraries piloted an event that provided their community with direct support for completing the FAFSA and making fully informed decisions about postsecondary opportunities. Their partnership plans to continue removing barriers to participation in future events by providing meals and other resources to attendees.

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23   Education First. (2024a).

Advising Models

High-quality advising is an important strategy to help students identify the right postsecondary education opportunities and support them in realizing their goals. College and career advising encompasses a wide range of programs and supports. Many Limitless partnerships included practitioner-leaders responsible for advising strategies, including college and career readiness advisors, navigators, higher education admissions professionals, student success coordinators and more. In Washington state, a key activity in postsecondary advising is the creation of each student's High School and Beyond Plan (HSBP), a state-mandated graduation requirement.[24] As the state prepares to implement a new HSBP platform, Limitless provided a space for the sharing of best practices and problem-solving related to this requirement.

Aligning College Application Deadlines in Puget Sound

Most education institutions function bureaucratically with top-down communication being pushed to all stakeholders in the system. This can create an incoherent or disjointed experience for students, families and advisors who are navigating poorly aligned timelines. In the Puget Sound region, a Limitless partnership identified a barrier to student enrollment in a local higher ed system and authored a collaborative letter to the executive cabinet petitioning for and securing a change in the application window/CTC Link. This shift will allow students and advisors to consider all local options for postsecondary education on the same timeline and will give students more time to gather documentation and apply for financial aid and other support.

24 Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (n.d.).

Dual Enrollment Expansion

Dual enrollment programs provide students with the opportunity to simultaneously make progress toward earning a high school diploma while earning college credits. The outcomes of effective dual enrollment programs are numerous, including lowering the cost of postsecondary education, preparing students for the rigor of college coursework and increasing student persistence toward and attainment of a postsecondary credential.[25] In Washington state, dual credit programs can take a few forms, including Running Start, Career Technical Education (CTE) Dual Credit, College in the High School or various advanced placement courses.[26] Within Limitless, many community and technical colleges supported dual enrollment approaches to improve course sequencing and coherence for students. Partners engaged in ongoing dialogue to identify strategies that avoid "random acts of dual credit," which provide students with college credits that are not transferable across institutions or applicable to their areas of study.

A Clear Message About Dual Credit in Whatcom and Skagit Counties

A working group emerged to bring together three Limitless partnerships geographically located near one another. Members of these partnerships included Mt. Baker High School, Meridian School District, Northwest Career Technical Academy, Whatcom Community College, Bellingham Technical College and Career Connect Northwest (CCNW) hosted at the Northwest Educational Service District (NWESD 189). Together, this regional working group is prioritizing an adaptive solution to a technical problem: they are working to build alignment across partnerships in their region to improve the coherence of dual credit experiences. The working group started by mapping the student experience through postsecondary transitions, with an emphasis on identifying the key activities, milestones and outreach campaigns in which students and families are learning about dual enrollment. Ultimately, the group hopes to create a more consistent and coherent message that minimizes frustration and confusion as students transition across institutions in their region. This work aligns with CCNW @NWESD 189's work to expand CTE Dual Credit in the region[27] under a pilot program led by the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC).

25 Velasco, T., Fink, J., Bedoya, M., & Jenkins, D. (2024).

26 Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. (n.d.).

27 Lindquist, B. (2023).

Career-Connected Learning

As high school and postsecondary partners come together to design and implement strategies, many discussions about high-quality career-connected learning arise. Educators and system leaders are grappling with questions about how to improve or expand CTE offerings and how to develop or scale work-based learning opportunities that provide students with career exploration, career preparation and on-the-job experiences. Within Limitless, Education First launched a working group on these topics that has discussed a range of federal and state initiatives related to career-connected learning and the ever-evolving conversation about cultivating "future-readiness" in young people through their high school to postsecondary transitions.

Implementing Apprenticeships in Grays Harbor County

Through Limitless, Elma School District has convened a new cross-sector partnership with three higher education partners and a workforce intermediary partner, AJAC. This partnership spans a broad geographic region in South Puget Sound that has come together to reflect on regional career technical education. AJAC supported Elma SD as it launched a successful Registered Apprenticeship Program, training young people in advanced manufacturing and connecting them to sustaining-wage employment opportunities. The partnership led to the creation of 90-minute sessions to educate Career and College Readiness staff on a diverse set of postsecondary pathways, including two-year community and technical college programs as well as four-year university degrees, military careers and apprenticeship opportunities.
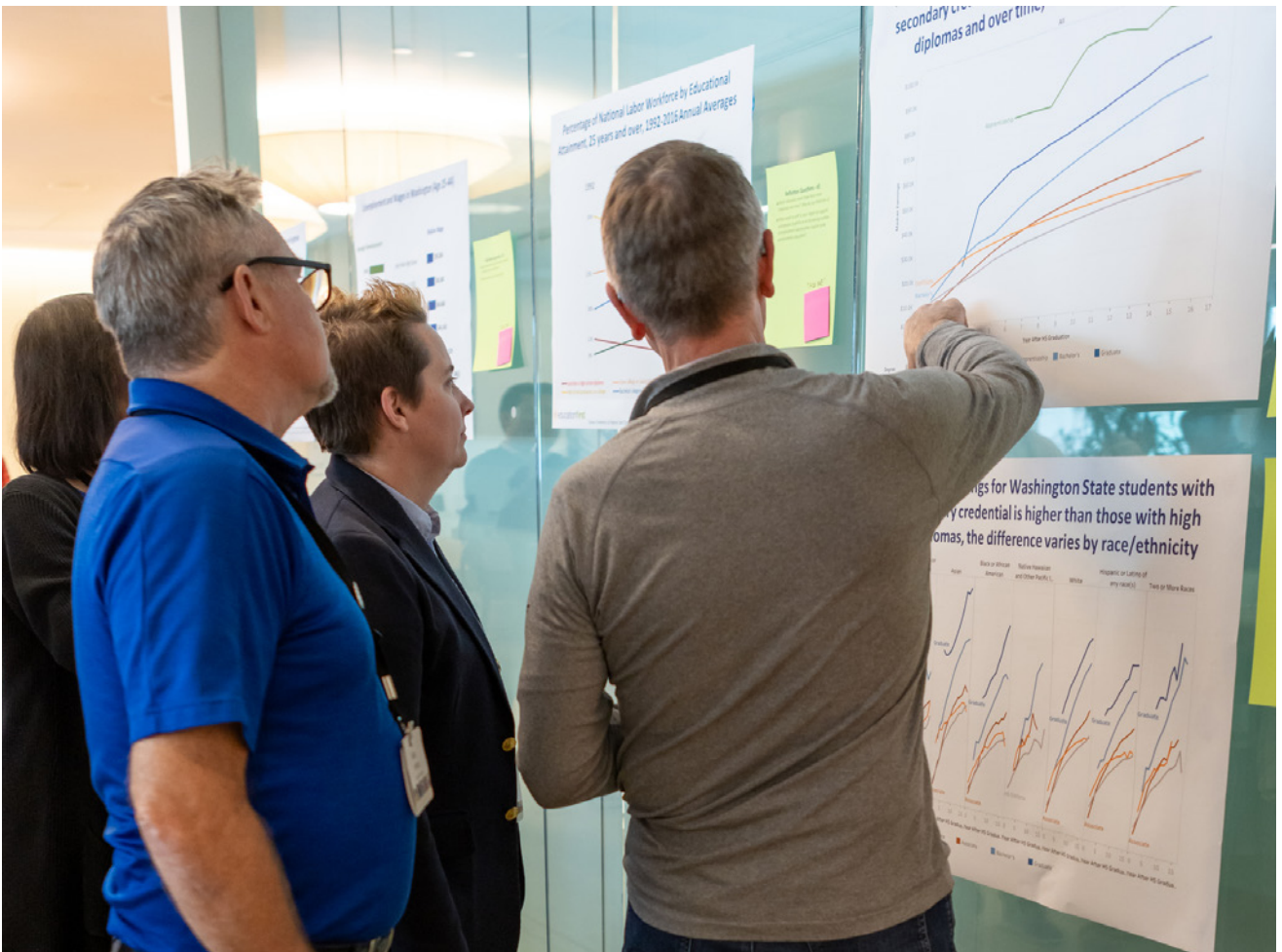
Implications

We believe that professional learning communities and networks can accelerate systems change in powerful and meaningful ways. In the years to come, the Limitless Learning Network has the potential to generate transformative strategies and solutions that will address postsecondary enrollment gaps in Washington state and increase lifelong outcomes for generations of students. Perhaps most exciting about Limitless is the level of impact generated within its first year. To build upon this momentum and realize the potential of a network like Limitless, we share a few recommendations for partners to consider.

Recommendations for District and Higher Ed System Leaders

Cross-sector partnership is challenging, but the potential for impact is great. Education system leaders must address fragmentation in their regions to advance transformative change. When cross-sector partnerships work effectively together, they can develop meaningful, coherent solutions to bridge gaps in postsecondary transitions and student outcomes. We hope that PK12 district and higher education system leaders within Limitless and beyond will bridge gaps and do the following:

1. **Champion transformational relationships and collaborative mindsets across systems**. The solutions to complex and pervasive challenges require leaders across education systems to build deep alignment around a shared vision. The greatest impact comes from building transformational relationships and partnerships that can replace transactional collaboration. To drive and sustain this work, PK12 and higher education system leaders must invest time and resources to get to know one another and to better understand each partner's personal and institutional priorities. They must also demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement and a willingness to engage in difficult conversations about identifying and deprioritizing or dismantling programs, systems and mindsets to realize a new, bold vision for success.

2. **Continue to reflect on and renew equity commitments.** Leveraging targeted universalism can provide partners with a framework to set universal goals for all students and targeted strategies that can support specific populations within their community to achieve desired outcomes.[28] To achieve their goals for all students, system leaders must encourage teams to step back and reflect upon their progress and on students' experiences in order to continually adjust their approaches. The best-laid intentions can get lost in implementation, and cross-sector partners must sustain their dialogue and interrogate the assumptions in programs and strategies. PK12 and higher education system leaders can move the needle by acknowledging the responsibility to advance equity at all levels of an organization, from interpersonal to structural shifts.

3. **Leverage many data sources to inform cross-sector initiatives**. Developing data fluency and data-sharing capacity is crucial for cross-sector partnerships to more deeply understand the impact and outcomes of their work. Think critically about the data sources that inform decision-making. What biases or gaps are inherent in the data? How does this limit the story that those data can tell? To avoid jumping to conclusions and ensure we are leading with an understanding of student, family and community experiences, needs and desires, outcomes data should be supplemented with qualitative data collected through interviews, focus groups or surveys.

4. **Engage students, families and communities in adapting national best practices in order to implement responsive, place-based solutions.** While learning networks can accelerate the sharing of promising practices and evidence-based strategies, there is no "one size fits all" approach. Replicating solutions can be effective, but we encourage K12 and higher education leaders to engage people most proximate in tailoring and adapting local implementation to be most responsive to local needs. Powerful solutions can be created when we not only consult but also go further to empower communities to participate in designing and implementing solutions.

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28 powell, j.a., Menendian, S., & Ake, W. (2019).

5. Braid funding and foster alignment around initiatives. We encourage PK12 and higher education leaders to identify additional opportunities to drive coherence and increase the sustainability of their initiatives. Change efforts don't exist in a vacuum. By braiding funding opportunities and coordinating across other initiatives, system leaders can build a throughline that generates excitement and buy-in across departments and teams.

Recommendations for Funders and Policy Leaders

Philanthropic and state grants can bolster the work of individual regional partnerships and ensure their long-term success. Sustained financial support is a critical driver of impact in place-based funding.[29] Funders and policy leaders navigate a rapidly shifting landscape in which federal, state or local politics and budgets can accelerate or effectively stall education reforms. Grantmakers and state agencies play a crucial role in creating an enabling environment for systems change. To sustain the momentum behind innovative cross-sector work, funders and policy leaders can provide critical resources and lend their supportive influence in the following ways:

1. **Invest in technical and adaptive solutions.** To address complex, systemic issues, we must think expansively about the work needed to drive stronger outcomes for students. Funders and policymakers can support the development of technical and adaptive solutions by investing in capacity-building for system leaders through learning networks and other communities of practice. Supporting the creation of strong, regional partnerships can also set communities up for success in future initiatives.

2. **Recognize the catalytic power of smaller, dispersed awards across regions.** Deeper investment is not always possible, but smaller, flexible awards have great potential to cultivate buy-in among participants in a learning community. Smaller innovation grants can provide the right seed funding to bring cross-sector partners to the table in order to start a dialogue about their longer-term vision for systems change.

3. **Consider ways to cede decision-making power to communities through flexible funding.** Grantmakers and policymakers can address top-down power dynamics by adopting principles from trust-based philanthropy that give grantees more autonomy to make decisions that will best serve their communities.[30] Flexible grant awards allow regional partnerships to invest dollars and funding in innovative ways. Removing restrictive grant criteria or providing broader accountability metrics can empower practitioner-leaders to think more creatively about their change efforts and how they might target culturally responsive strategies to support student populations in ways that can transform the relationships within a community, but which may not be immediately supported by results data.

4. **Enable coherent systems change through multiyear investments.** Transforming systems is complex work and requires adequate time to shift mindsets, policies and structures. To develop the relationships and regional buy-in required to support these changes, funders and policymakers can provide partnerships with a longer runway to build and strengthen their collaboration. They should consider concurrent initiatives within regional ecosystems and support partnerships in building coherent approaches that braid different funding sources.

5. **Apply downstream learnings to inform upstream solutions—and vice versa.** Complex challenges require direct support to address immediate community needs while longer-term systemic fixes are being developed. Many actors lead work in our education ecosystems—some implement programs, policies or other strategies "upstream," and others engage students, families and communities further "downstream." Funders and policymakers are uniquely positioned to align these efforts and ensure they stay informed of the system challenges experienced by practitioner-leaders navigating day-to-day challenges. Connecting actors across the ecosystem for learning and coordination of the change efforts can increase impact and build coherence.

29   Education First. (2022).
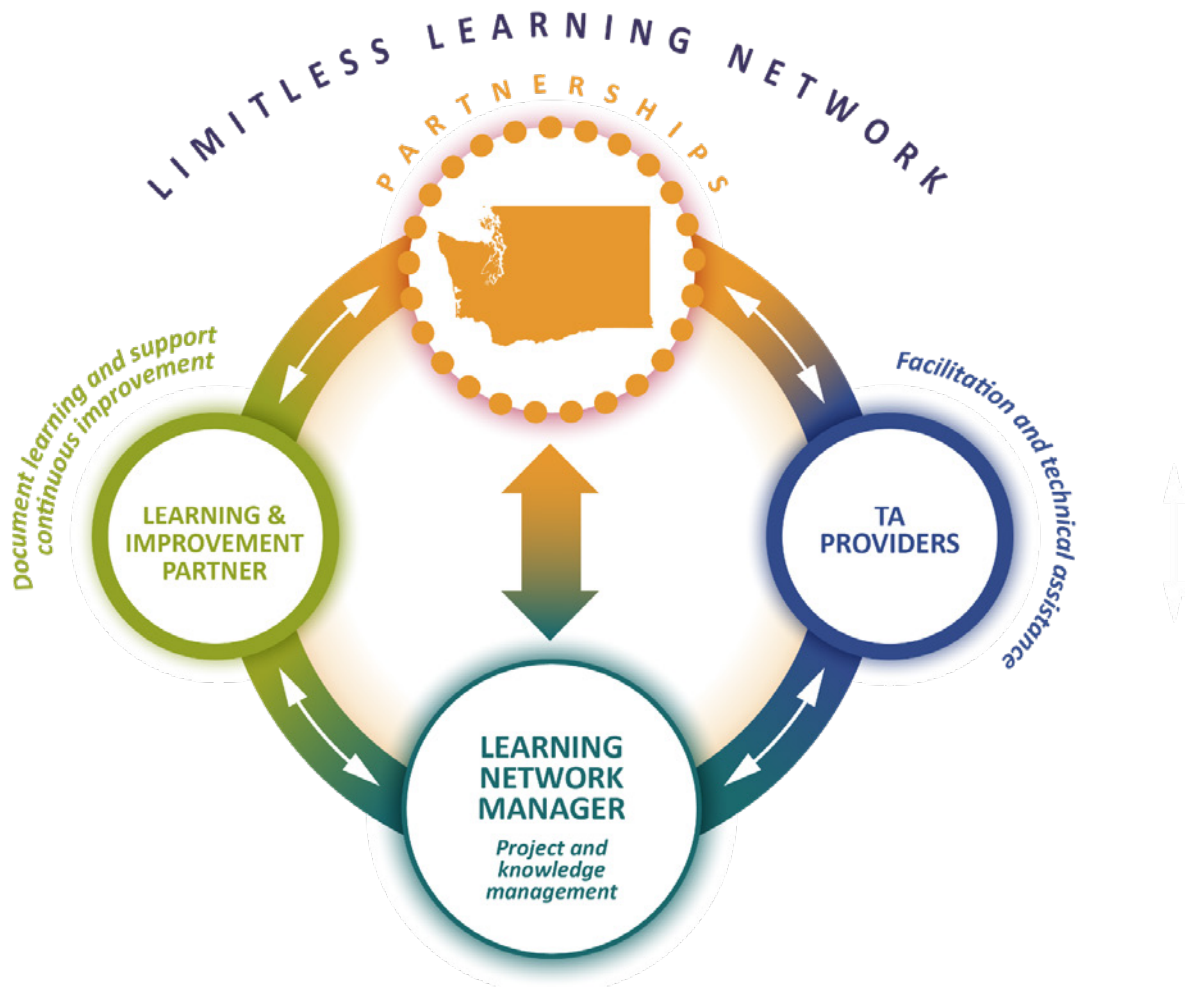30   Trust-Based Philanthropy Project. (n.d.).

APPENDICES

Limitless Learning Network Partnerships

	COUNTY	K12 SCHOOL DISTRICT PARTNER(S)	HIGHER EDUCATION PARTNER(S)	ADDITIONAL PARTNER(S)
1	Chelan	Lake Chelan School District; Manson School District	Wenatchee Valley College	Apple STEM Network; ESD 171
2	Clark; Klickitat; Skamania	Hockinson School District; Stevenson-Carson School District; White Salmon Valley School District	Washington State University Vancouver	ESD 112
3	Cowlitz	Castle Rock School District	Lower Columbia College; Clark College	ESD 112
4	Grant	Quincy School District	Big Bend Community College	Apple STEM Network; ESD 171
5	Grays Harbor	Elma School District	Clover Park Technical College; Grays Harbor College; WSU Elson S. Floyd College of Medicine	
6	Island	Oak Harbor Public Schools	Skagit Valley College	Sno-Isle Libraries Foundation; Sno-Isle Libraries
7	King	Why Not You Academy (charter governed by Cascade Public Schools)	College Unbound; Washington State University	KD Hall Foundation (Girls on the Rise)
8	King	Kent School District; Renton School District; Seattle Public Schools	Green River College	Washington Alliance for Better Schools
9	King	Seattle Public Schools	Seattle Colleges District	
10	King	Federal Way Public Schools; Highline Public Schools; Tukwila School District	Highline College	Puget Sound ESD
11	Kitsap	Bremerton School District	Olympic College	Kitsap Strong
12	Mason	Shelton School District	The Evergreen State College	ESD 113
13	Skagit	Northwest Career and Technical Academy (under Mount Vernon School District)	Bellingham Technical College; Skagit Valley College	
14	Snohomish	Edmonds School District	Edmonds College	Foundation for Edmonds School District
15	Snohomish	Everett Public Schools	Everett Community College	College Success Foundation
16	Spokane	Spokane Public Schools	Eastern Washington University	College Success Foundation
17	Spokane	Spokane Public Schools	Gonzaga University	
18	Stevens	Mary Walker School District	Community Colleges of Spokane (Spokane Community College and Spokane Falls Community College)	
19	Walla Walla	College Place Public Schools; Walla Walla Public Schools	Walla Walla Community College; Whitman College	United Way of the Blue Mountains; ESD 123
20	Whatcom	Ferndale School District	Western Washington University	
21	Whatcom	Mount Baker School District	Whatcom Community College	College Success Foundation; Mount Baker Scholarship Foundation
22	Whatcom	Meridian School District	Bellingham Technical College	Boys & Girls Clubs of Whatcom County
23	Yakima	Yakima School District	Central Washington University	
24	Yakima	Mount Adams School District	Heritage University	
25	Yakima; Franklin	Granger School District; Selah School District	Yakima Valley College	College Success Foundation; ESD 105
26	Kitsap; Clallam; Mason; Jefferson; and Grays Harbor	Bainbridge Island School District; Cape Flattery School District; Chief Kitsap Academy; North Kitsap School District; North Mason School District; Port Townsend School District; Quilcene School District; Quillayute Valley School District; Sequim School District; South Kitsap School District	Peninsula College	West Sound STEM Network; College Success Foundation

Limitless Network Structure

The graphic below is illustrates the structure of the Limitless Network.

LIMITLESS LEARNING NETWORK

PARTNERSHIPS

Document learning and support continuous improvement

Facilitation and technical assistance

LEARNING & IMPROVEMENT PARTNER

TA PROVIDERS

LEARNING NETWORK MANAGER

Project and knowledge management

Unlocking opportunities for young people across Washington state and helping more students transition from high school to postsecondary

Limitless TA Providers and Support Partners

Listed below are the organizations that supported the Limitless Network during its first year.

TA Providers

In Year 1 (Fall 2023—Winter 2024), three organizations received funding to provide ongoing TA to participating members of the Limitless Learning Network. TA support included: developing and facilitating breakout sessions for in-person and virtual convenings; launching and supporting a working group; providing 1:1 thought partnership to Network members via office hours or by appointment; sharing effective practices and resources via monthly newsletters; and/or hosting ad hoc webinars on emerging topics of interest.

Learning and Improvement Partner

Limitless is supported by a Learning and Improvement Partner, Sankofa Consulting. The organization plays a critical role in assessing the strength of the Network through measurement, learning and evaluation (MLE) activities including a baseline survey, focus groups and observation. These efforts yielded valuable insights, allowing the Network Manager, TA Providers and Support Partners to be responsive to Network Member feedback.

Additional Support Partners

Limitless maintains an ongoing relationship with a number of state agencies and partners in Washington state who play critical roles in developing policy and guidance for educators and system leaders. We are grateful for their collaboration and the roles they played in providing thought partnership to the Network, developing and facilitating breakout sessions, sharing guidance and insight as members of working groups and sharing resources via monthly newsletters.

Learning Network Manager

The Network Manager coordinates and supports the activities of the Limitless Learning Network, ensuring alignment with shared goals and objectives. Key responsibilities include fostering collaboration among members, managing logistics and communication, providing technical assistance in the Network's focus areas and maintaining a focus on equity and impact. Education First was tapped by the Gates Foundation to design and incubate the Network due to its expertise in pathway transitions, local knowledge of Washington state and experience launching similar learning Networks across the country. In December 2024, Education Northwest assumed the role of Network Manager to guide the Network's next phase.[31]

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31   Education First. (2024b).

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About Education First

Education First is a national, mission-driven strategy and policy organization with unique and deep expertise in education improvement. Our mission is to deliver exceptional ideas, experience-based solutions and results so all students—particularly Black, Indigenous and other students of color and students living in low-income communities—are prepared for success in college, career and life. We envision a world in which every student is prepared to succeed—a world in which income and race no longer determine the quality of education. Our mission is lived through our solutions and strategies by working with funders, states, policymakers, nonprofits, local education agencies and more.

This report was authored by Kelly Kovacic Duran, Yeonjae Lee, and Sarina Sheth Noone. More information about Education First's work, including other research reports and resources on supporting learning networks and postsecondary pathways is available at www.education-first.com.