

**K-12 Collaborative Engagement Project:  
Addressing the Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic**  
Summary of Three Convenings in Washington State



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## THE PROJECT IN BRIEF

### Background

This project began March of 2021, when the William D. Ruckelshaus Center (the Center) initiated a comprehensive effort to identify lessons learned and share key insights from Washington's response to the Covid-19 pandemic to improve preparedness, recovery, and resilience in Washington State. The project was designed to collect and synthesize information, frame issues, and consider recommendations with consideration of race, equity, and social justice principles. More than 75 individuals and groups with responsibilities for decision-making and response implementation were interviewed. A final summary of that project, [\*Learning from Responses to Covid-19: Improving Preparedness, Recovery, and Resilience in Washington State\*](#), was produced in June 2022. A significant area of concern interviewees raised was the impact of the pandemic on children and youth.

In response, the Center engaged in a deep inquiry in 2023 and 2024 to better understand the ongoing impacts of the pandemic on Washington's children and youth. The Center conducted interviews with more than 90 teachers, students, principals, superintendents, state agency staff, community organizations, school board directors, mental health professionals, researchers, and others, to understand ongoing impacts from Covid and identify the initiatives and interventions that are successfully supporting children and youth's social, emotional, and academic health and recovery. This resulted in two reports: [\*Learning from Covid-19 Impacts to K-12: Preliminary Summary of Lessons, Reflections, and Recommendations from Across Washington State\*](#), in December 2024, and [\*Ongoing Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on K-12 in Washington State Final Report: Lessons, Reflections, and Recommendations from Across Washington State\*](#), in July 2025.

### The K-12 Collaborative Engagement Project

This K-12 Collaborative Engagement Project builds on the previous projects, with the purpose of convening educators, administrators, students, agency staff, nonprofits, researchers, and community organizations to learn from one another and co-create approaches to support the recovery of Washington State's children and youth from the ongoing social, emotional, and academic impacts of the pandemic.

This project is designed to bring attention to ongoing pandemic impacts on children and the WA K-12 system and renew participants' commitment to addressing recovery through the following kinds of activities:

- Explore promising practices that help children and youth thrive academically, socially, and emotionally, as well as those supporting caregivers, educators, and administrators.
- Share challenges and lessons learned across districts and communities.
- Identify successful approaches and opportunities for collaboration to support mental health, belonging, and academic achievement.
- Generate practical ideas and commitments participants can take back to their schools and organizations.

The Center held three convenings to explore the potential of this approach with different groups in different parts of the state and in both in-person and virtual settings. The convenings were as follows:

- In Yakima, organized by Educational Service District (ESD) 105, in October 2025. Approximately 23 participants included ESD 105 staff, several district superintendents, other district staff, and principals.

- In Gig Harbor, organized by the Peninsula School District, in November 2025. The participants included 28 high school students from three schools. Several adults, including a superintendent, school board member, and school administrators and staff were also in attendance.
- A virtual meeting, organized by the Association of Washington State Principals, in November 2025. Participants were several principals and assistant principals from around the state.

All convenings followed a similar structure, focused on several questions:

- What are the ongoing impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic you are seeing or experiencing?
- A brief presentation of the Center’s findings from its July 2025 final report.
- What is being done to address pandemic impacts?
  - What is working?
  - What is not working? For whom?
  - What is needed to better address the impacts?
  - What new partnerships or collaborations could be helpful?
- Based on this discussion, what are next steps?

Time constraints occasionally limited conversation or prevented participants from answering all questions.

## FINDINGS

The broad findings from the convenings are:

- The impacts of the pandemic continue to ripple through the K-12 system, into higher education, and beyond, as students graduate or leave school, though these impacts are often not recognized or discussed as being pandemic related.
- Funding for pandemic recovery has dried up, and as both state and federal budgets face deep cuts, funding to support students’ academic, social, and emotional well-being is threatened.
- There continues to be a great deal of interest in addressing ongoing pandemic impacts, but there seems to be a general lack of interest in thinking about pandemic related issues, including recovery, because of the negative associations people hold in their minds about the pandemic and the desire to move past that time. Consequently, labeling efforts as pandemic recovery may be counterproductive.

The following summary of learnings from convening participants is organized by the questions participants responded to.

### What ongoing pandemic impacts did participants see or experience?

For the most part, input from participants in the three convenings mirrored the Center’s findings in the July 2025 [report](#). This included:

- For students: learning gaps stemming from pandemic era learning loss, decreased social and mental well-being, problems with attendance, decreased ability to navigate social interactions with peers, increased feelings of loneliness and anxiety, increased screen time and social media use, and difficulty accessing mental health services.
- For adults: decreased funding, for example in early learning, increased expectations of schools to provide nonacademic supports, social isolation, staff absences, and anxiety.

New things that we heard included: students demonstrate less respect for teachers than before, the attention span of students has decreased, and there has been an increase in preschool speech and language delays.

### What can be addressed now?

Participants identified several things that can be addressed in the short term, including:

- Plant seeds with legislators about fully funding schools.
- Integrate social and emotional learning into the school day and work with students to provide them with learning more tailored to their needs and that includes more group interaction and discussion, particularly at the secondary level.
- Work more closely with community members and connections that can provide support, including mental health professionals, universities, educational service districts, community-based organizations, and others.
- Seek access to behavior specialists from local universities.
- Increase out-of-school opportunities for students, such as sports and clubs.
- Educate parents about the impact of screens and social media on their children.

### What is working (and for whom)?

Many activities in schools are already working to address ongoing pandemic impacts. Participants identified the following activities as showing success:

- Work with early learning nonprofits providing early learning support for eligible families.
- In-person forums that encourage parent and student voice, as well as virtual spaces for some parents, for whom it may be more convenient or who may feel safer.
- Social and emotional learning (SEL) in Kindergarten through eighth grade has reduced disciplinary issues in some schools.
- Cell phone bans in schools are reducing student anxiety and conflict and improving classroom focus.
- School-based mental health facilities and telehealth in rural areas.
- Having engaged and available teachers, and tutors, when needed.
- Academic flexibility tailored to students' needs.

### What is needed?

Things that are needed to address ongoing pandemic impacts that participants identified include:

- Fully fund schools, and provide adequate funding for special services for students with behavioral, academic, and social/emotional needs. (Many of the needs identified below would also likely require funding.)
- Pass legislation to create age verification for social media.
- Create a 21<sup>st</sup> Century public education system that prepares students for the challenges they will be facing. For example, through mastery-based learning and more student-centered and culturally-engaged approaches. Representative Santos's Big Ideas Group is convening to rethink education.
- Involve board-certified behavior analysts.
- Identify learning gaps and triage them as needed.
- Support students who weren't taught foundational reading skills and are behind in reading.

- Support school staff who may not have the skills or capability to address SEL, perhaps with help from the community.
- Educate parents about SEL and student mental health.
- More time for teachers with students, so that SEL can be prioritized sufficiently.
- More opportunity for students to discuss social and emotional issues, including more facilitated opportunities for social connection.
- Support for students who want to learn online.
- Create a sense of belonging for students to ensure that no student is invisible.
- Increase student voice in addressing ongoing pandemic impacts, as well as how they learn.
- Provide parenting and behavior management training and support for parents in handling situations facing families.
- Establish time and space for teachers and administrators to learn about ongoing pandemic impacts and tools for responding to them.
- Establish more teacher and administrator support systems.
- Maintain and enhance support for LGBTQ students.
- Provide more guidance on artificial intelligence to educators and school administrators.
- Work towards an overhaul of the core curriculum structure.
- Expand access to early childhood learning.
- Provide school staff education on neurological differences.
- Continue and expand leadership development for principals and assistant principals.
- Continue and expand tutoring for students who need it and maybe can't afford it.
- Create opportunities for university and K-12 partnerships; using research-based systems instead of having to buy programs.
- Provide training for principals and assistant principals in handling difficult or extreme student behaviors, as well as de-escalation.

### What are the next steps?

Many interviewees said there was value in these conversations and expressed interest in having similar conversations in the future, as well as building on the discussions that were had. Additional convenings could include community-based organizations and others that were not a part of these initial discussions and there could be increased opportunities for discussions across silos and hierarchies.

## MOVING FORWARD

Building on the strong interest expressed by participants, the Center recommends continuing structured and facilitated convenings that bring together students, educators, administrators, agency staff, and community partners across regions of the state. Participants particularly valued opportunities to engage with peers in similar roles and to share practical strategies across silos.

Future convenings can support movement from shared understanding to coordinated action by:

- Identifying common priorities across regions and roles.
- Supporting collaboration across education, health, and community systems.
- Informing state-level policy development with grounded, field-based insights.

The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on Washington's children and youth have not ended. They continue to affect students' emotional well-being, academic success, and social development. Addressing them requires intentional policy alignment, sustained investment, and collaborative

leadership. Participants in these convenings demonstrated both the urgency of the challenge and the readiness of educators, students, and communities to partner in solutions. Strategic action at the state level can help ensure that recovery efforts translate into long-term resilience and opportunity for Washington's students.

Given the continuing need to address serious and persistent pandemic impacts, and based on participants' input, the Center reiterates its recommendations from the July 2025 [report](#). In addition, these convenings indicate a desire and need for continuing similar conversations among students, educators, administrators, agency staff, and others involved in the K-12 system to address ongoing pandemic-related impacts and improve the academic, social, and emotional well-being of Washington's children and youth. The Center encourages others interested in building on this effort to continue to initiate these conversations and expand opportunities for the learning and sharing of challenges and successes.