



LIMITLESS LEARNING NETWORK

# Highlights and Learnings from a Year of Collaboration

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# About Education Northwest

Education Northwest is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping all learners reach their full potential. We partner with public, private, and community-based organizations across the United States to conduct research and evaluations, build organizational capacity, provide professional development, and design learning experiences that promote improved student outcomes.

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# Executive summary

Since November 2023, the Limitless Learning Network has been working to improve high school-to-postsecondary transitions across Washington state. The Network engages 26 regional partnerships to confront inequities in postsecondary access and completion through collaborative, place-based, and data-driven approaches. As network manager, Education Northwest supports the overall project, shared learning opportunities, and knowledge mobilization efforts. This report highlights our early insights, including key accomplishments and common challenges across the Network.

## Emerging insights

According to partnership reports, convening K–12, higher education, and community partners to collaborate and share learnings is making a difference on practitioners and communities.



Educators and leaders are growing and learning as individuals, and they are sharing this knowledge with their schools, districts, institutions, and organizations.



Partnerships are collaborating, using data, and engaging students and families around three priority strategies: quality advising, financial aid, and dual credit.



Limitless is reinforcing the importance of collaborating and aligning systems to improve postsecondary transitions, especially for students who face the greatest barriers: Black, Latinx, and Native students and students from rural and low-income backgrounds.

## Systemic challenges

Despite their accomplishments, Limitless partnerships face persistent systemic challenges in their work to improve high school-to-postsecondary transitions, including:



**Staff capacity and turnover**



**Broader social challenges, including affordability and narratives about the value of postsecondary education**



**Sustainable funding for the work**

## Implications

The findings point to several practical implications for educators, leaders, and organizations working to improve high school-to-postsecondary transitions across Washington.

### For K–12 practitioners and leaders

Protected time for cross-sector collaboration is foundational. Leaders can support this work by treating Limitless partnership activities as core professional responsibilities, rather than add-ons, and by investing in data infrastructure to track student outcomes beyond graduation. Integrating FAFSA and WASFA

completion support into existing counseling and advisory structures, rather than relying on standalone events, is one of the highest-leverage steps districts can take.

### **For postsecondary practitioners and leaders**

Colleges and universities play a critical role in making partnership work sustainable. Designating a consistent institutional point of contact for K–12 partnerships, formalizing data-sharing agreements, and simplifying dual credit enrollment and transfer processes are concrete steps that reduce confusion for students and staff alike. Institutions can also support equity goals by deploying financial aid staff into high schools and community settings in underserved areas, rather than waiting for students to seek out that support on campus.

### **For community-based organizations**

Organizations can build trust with students and families. Offering postsecondary planning support, including financial aid assistance, in community settings, in multiple languages, and through trusted messengers can help reach students and families. Organizations can also strengthen Limitless partnerships by advocating for genuine family and student voice in planning and decision-making.

### **For policymakers**

Limitless has demonstrated that place-based, cross-sector collaboration can improve student outcomes. Sustaining and scaling these gains will require policy attention to three persistent challenges: staff capacity and turnover across K–12 and higher education, data-sharing barriers between systems, and the absence of sustainable funding for regional partnership infrastructure. Investments in these areas would help build on the momentum Limitless has generated.

## **Looking ahead**

Washington has all the necessary elements for a robust, equitable postsecondary transition ecosystem, and Limitless partnerships are working hard to make this vision a reality. In the final year of Limitless, our priority as network manager is to meet the needs identified by partnerships and support practitioners to drive lasting change statewide.

# Contents

- Executive summary ..... ii**
- Emerging insights ..... ii
- Implications ..... ii
- Systemic challenges ..... iii
- Looking ahead ..... iii
- About Limitless Learning Network..... 1**
- Emerging insights from Limitless ..... 3
- Limitless is making a difference..... 4**
- Practitioners are collaborating and sharing knowledge within and across partnerships ..... 4
- Partnerships are using data to identify barriers and co-develop strategies, but capacity varies across the state ..... 7
- Partnerships use and share strategies related to quality advising, with many focused on postsecondary exposure ..... 10
- Financial aid awareness and completion remains an area of growth across the state; partnerships focused on culturally responsive outreach and FAFSA completion support ..... 11
- Partnerships are working to increase access to meaningful dual credit opportunities that support postsecondary success ..... 14
- Partnerships recognize that student and family engagement are essential to any effort to improve high school-to-postsecondary transitions ..... 15
- Systemic challenges remain in the high school-to-postsecondary ecosystem..... 17**
- Staff capacity and turnover can make efforts to improve high school-to-postsecondary transitions more difficult ..... 17
- Data-related challenges, siloed systems, and narratives about the value of postsecondary education can inhibit change ..... 17
- Societal challenges including affordability and housing insecurity remain a barrier ..... 18
- Implications for practice ..... 20**
- Looking ahead..... 22**
- References ..... 23**

**FIGURES**

Figure 1. Limitless Learning Network visual 2

Figure 2. Limitless Learning Network timeline 3

Figure 3. Most Limitless partnerships currently collect data, but fewer share data back with their communities 8

Figure 4. Students in Limitless regions completed the FAFSA at higher rates than students in Washington state overall 13

**TABLE**

Table 1. Limitless partnerships want support around interpreting and making meaning of data with their communities 9

# About Limitless Learning Network

Across Washington state, there is a need and great opportunity to improve the transition from high school to postsecondary education. Improving this transition could help students accomplish their goals, support the state's workforce, and strengthen communities. Although 90 percent of high school students in Washington aspire to go to college (Washington STEM, 2025), just over half enroll within a year of completing high school (Education Research & Data Center, 2025). Systemic inequities in postsecondary access and success remain. Meanwhile, workforce demand for postsecondary education remains high. Close to 70 percent of all projected job openings in the state require at least some education beyond high school (Washington Roundtable, 2018). This includes not just four-year degrees, but any type of postsecondary education or credential. Improving postsecondary access and success can also generate tangible rewards for individuals and their communities: Research shows that students who complete postsecondary education have higher lifetime earnings as well as improved health, connections, and civic engagement outcomes (Gallup & Lumina Foundation, 2023).

Recognizing these challenges and opportunities, the Limitless Learning Network has been working to improve high school-to-postsecondary transitions across Washington since November 2023. Limitless brings together practitioners and programs to confront inequities in postsecondary access and completion through collaborative, place-based, and data-driven approaches. The statewide network engages 26 regional partnerships that include school district directors of college and career readiness, higher education enrollment staff members, and nonprofit organizations that provide college and career guidance.

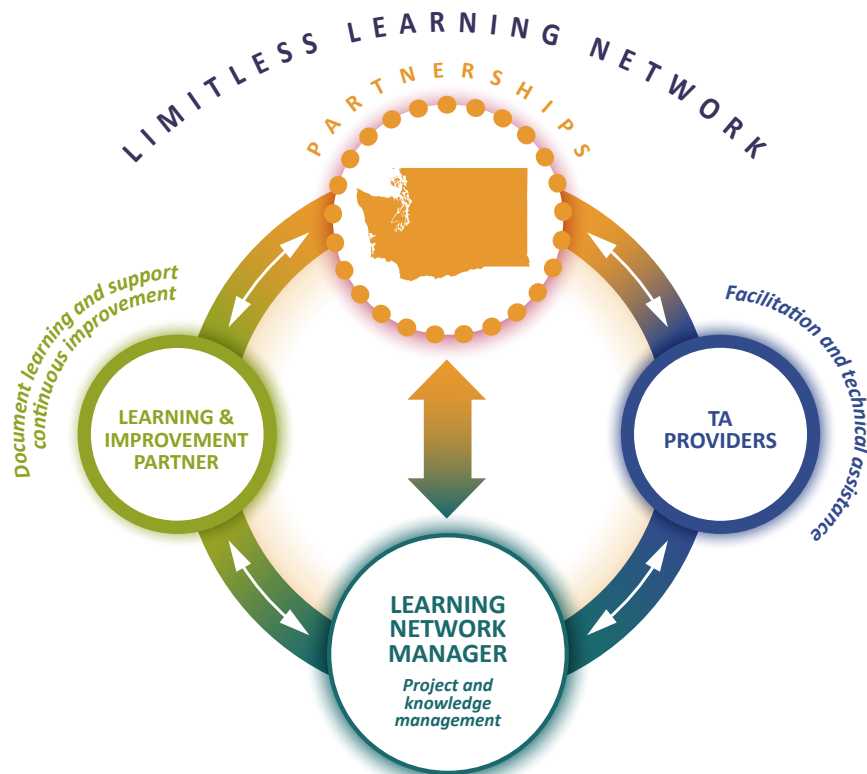
The purpose and design of the Limitless Learning Network is to:

1. Improve partnership capacities to drive cross-system engagement, action, and outcomes and support scaling in the long term across Washington state.
2. Improve data capacity for increased access to and use of high school-to-postsecondary data among network members.
3. Increase awareness and improve access to strategies and approaches, and improve the ability to implement these strategies, among practitioner leaders who support high school-to-postsecondary transitions and who prioritize closing equity gaps.

The Limitless Learning Network aims to support students who have historically faced the largest barriers to postsecondary success: Black, Native, and Latinx students, as well as students from rural and low-income backgrounds. These efforts are rooted in a model of targeted universalism (powell et al., 2019), a strategic framework where targeted and differentiated efforts are required to meet the needs of specific student populations. Limitless focuses on supporting students who face the greatest systemic barriers to postsecondary success and, in doing so, aims to improve systems overall.

Limitless participants connect with teams of local K–12 and higher education partners across Washington to share information, explore new ideas, and develop best practices together. Partnerships collaborate to improve outcomes and strengthen the state’s ecosystem of support—all with the goal of unlocking opportunities for young people and helping more students take control of their own futures. Regional partnerships are supported in their work by technical assistance providers, a learning and improvement partner (Sankofa Consulting), and a network manager (Education Northwest; figure 1).

**Figure 1. Limitless Learning Network visual**



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

Source: Limitless Learning Network.

Limitless is currently in its third year (figure 2), and Education Northwest is in our second year as network manager. Education First served as inaugural network manager when Limitless launched in 2023. Education Northwest transitioned into this role in December 2024, supporting the overall project, shared learning opportunities, and knowledge mobilization efforts. In each academic year, Limitless comes together for four virtual sessions, two in-person convenings, quarterly check-ins with Education Northwest, and optional working group meetings. In addition, partnerships meet regularly to plan and implement their programs, policies, and initiatives.






**Figure 2. Limitless Learning Network timeline**



Source: Education Northwest.

## Emerging insights from Limitless

This report summarizes early learnings from our time as network manager, including key accomplishments and common challenges across the state from end-of-year reports submitted by partnerships in 2025. Partnership leads completed the reports to share progress on goals, describe partnership activities from 2024–2025, and identify goals for 2025–2026. From these reports, Education Northwest identified several takeaways:

<p>The activities and goals of Limitless partnerships vary greatly. Some partnerships focus on systemic and policy changes in large districts or regions, while others offer more targeted programming to a smaller number of students and families.</p>	
 <p>Nearly all partnerships focus on financial aid in some capacity (e.g., FAFSA nights, mentors supporting with financial aid awareness, etc.), but the level of activities and support varies.</p>	 <p>Most partnerships focus on quality advising through an emphasis on college-going culture and exposure to postsecondary education (e.g., mentoring, field trips).</p>
 <p>About half of partnerships reported a specific focus on dual enrollment (e.g., establishing articulation agreements, increasing awareness, etc.).</p>	 <p>About half of partnerships have an explicit focus on student and family engagement (e.g., parent advisory groups, family nights, etc.).</p>
 <p>Most partnerships described a specific focus on improving data capacity within their team (e.g., collecting data, establishing data sharing agreements, accessing publicly available data, etc.)</p>	

The rest of this report dives deeper into these emerging insights, lifting up the accomplishments and challenges that partnerships have experienced in their work.

# Limitless is making a difference

Data from end-of-year partnership reports indicate that the Limitless Learning Network facilitates collaboration and knowledge sharing within regions and across Washington state.

## Practitioners are collaborating and sharing knowledge within and across partnerships

One goal of Limitless is to improve partnership capacities to drive cross-system engagement, action, and outcomes across Washington. The Network aims to increase collaboration and shared learning statewide. Based on partnership end-of-year reports, collaboration and knowledge mobilization are increasing and taking root. Practitioners are collaborating within their partnerships and sharing resources, strategies, and learnings across partnerships.

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**“What began as a small core team has broadened into a deeper network of educators who are aligning their work more intentionally. Regular meetings, shared planning, and joint problem solving have allowed us to move from broad conversations about postsecondary readiness to concrete actions such as piloting transfer guides, coordinating faculty visits, and developing tools to help students and families understand how dual credit and certificate programs apply to college pathways.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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Many partnerships described how the Network has supported their team’s collaboration and learning. One partnership reported, “Our greatest achievement has been building a stronger, more intentional partnership between the college and the school district. This success grew from the dedicated time we’ve spent engaging in meaningful, shared work.” The dedicated collaboration time available through Limitless was cited as an important factor by many partnerships. The Network’s structure and funding allow partnerships to come together, which would otherwise be difficult given competing priorities.

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**“The Limitless Learning Network has shown us what the power of collaboration can accomplish. Collaborating accelerates our ability to serve students more holistically and in a timely fashion.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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Many partnerships specifically mentioned the twice annual in-person convenings as an important catalyst for change. As one partnership shared, “Dedicated team time at an in-person convening is how we put a concrete work plan in place with timelines and deliverables.” With two days dedicated to collaboration and shared learning, partnerships can set goals and plan for the year. In addition, the in-person convenings facilitate cross-partnership learning.

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**“The in-person convenings have been really transformational for our region. We are small and rural; getting to learn from other regional partnerships has given us inspiration and ideas to bring to our communities.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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Other partnerships mentioned specific strategies or initiatives they learned about through Limitless. For example, one partnership shared, “One of the most valuable resources our partnership has gained from participating in Limitless is knowledge of and participation in WAGAP [Washington Guaranteed Admissions Program].” This demonstrates the Network’s power to share information across the state to support postsecondary success.

The Washington Guaranteed Admissions Program (WAGAP) facilitates guaranteed admission to several colleges in Washington, including Central Washington University, Eastern Washington University, the Evergreen State College, University of Washington Tacoma, Washington State University, and Western Washington University. WAGAP, which is led by the Council of Presidents, supports a college-going culture in schools across the state.

Through WAGAP, students know they will be admitted to these six universities before applying if they meet these criteria:

- Minimum GPA of 3.0
- Completed or on track to complete all College Academic Distribution Requirements (CADRs) by the fall term immediately following high school graduation
- School has an agreement with the participating universities to be part of the program

In end-of-year reports, partnerships described the time needed to build trust and transparency within their partnership. Many partnerships said they spent the first part of the grant coming together as a team, building relationships, and identifying shared goals.

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**“We’ve been able to engage in honest, transparent dialogue about how each institution contributes and the barriers we face due to personal or institutional capacity.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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In addition, end-of-year reports described the value of bringing together diverse perspectives through Limitless partnerships. Any strategy aimed at improving high school-to-postsecondary transitions should be based on local context and community needs. Students, families, and the community should not only give input but also co-develop strategies that will work for their context.

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**“The team’s diverse membership—including district parents, a student, and graduates—has ensured that our plans are rooted in the lived realities of our community.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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While building trust is ongoing work, many partnerships are now taking actions and implementing strategies that meet their community’s needs. In the year 2 Limitless evaluation report, Sankofa Consulting shared findings from an annual survey on collaboration within and across partnerships (Sankofa Consulting, 2025):

<p><b>84%</b> of respondents reported a clear understanding of how their partnership will address systemic barriers.</p> <p>This was an increase from 2024 (81%), which demonstrates that partnerships are prepared to make changes that address systemic barriers.</p>	<p><b>92%</b> of respondents said they collaborate with colleagues with diverse perspectives, demonstrating that collaboration across systems and positions is a benefit of the Network.</p>
<p><b>88%</b> of respondents shared resources and learnings with their organizations. This shows that Limitless is influencing individuals and organizations beyond direct network participants.</p>	<p><b>100%</b> of respondents exchanged knowledge. Based on Sankofa’s analysis, interactions across the Network have tripled from the first year.</p>

Taken together, survey findings and end-of-year reports demonstrate that Limitless participants are increasingly collaborating and sharing strategies to better support students and improve systems. Partnership feedback suggests that the original idea behind Limitless is being realized: Participants are collaborating across systems, sharing knowledge, and acting based on this knowledge.

#### **Implications for K–12 practitioners and leaders**

- Dedicate protected time in school or district calendars for cross-sector planning with higher education and community partners instead of relying on individuals to make time or treating it as an add-on when bandwidth allows.

#### **Implications for postsecondary practitioners and leaders**

- Identify a dedicated point of contact at your institution for K–12 partnership work. Ensure that person has the authority and capacity to make and keep commitments on behalf of your institution.
- Formalize relationships with feeder districts through memoranda of understanding (MOUs) or data-sharing agreements; informal relationships rarely survive staff turnover.

## **Partnerships are using data to identify barriers and co-develop strategies, but capacity varies across the state**

Another goal of Limitless is to improve data capacity for increased access to and use of high school-to-postsecondary data among network participants. In end-of-year reports, partnerships shared how data is informing their Limitless efforts. Partnerships are identifying strengths and areas of growth based on data, both quantitative and qualitative. One partnership said, “During the first 18 months, we developed a comprehensive data plan, collected and collaboratively analyzed multiple sources of data, and designed strategies grounded in these findings.” This work takes time and often involves overcoming barriers, such as data delays, difficulties accessing and sharing data, and other technical and systemic challenges. Many partnerships are pairing multiple sources of data to identify gaps and areas for increased resources and supports.

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**“We have used data to identify systemic barriers and refine strategies across institutions. Educator focus groups, paired with survey results, highlighted a gap between staff perceptions of the support they were providing and students’ reported experiences. This finding has led us to explore professional learning for educators, clearer advising tools, and more consistent messaging across staff.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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Multiple partnerships have established data-sharing agreements between districts and colleges, allowing for increased collaboration and shared understanding of student outcomes.

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**“A major outcome of this strengthened relationship was the creation of a formal data-sharing agreement.”**

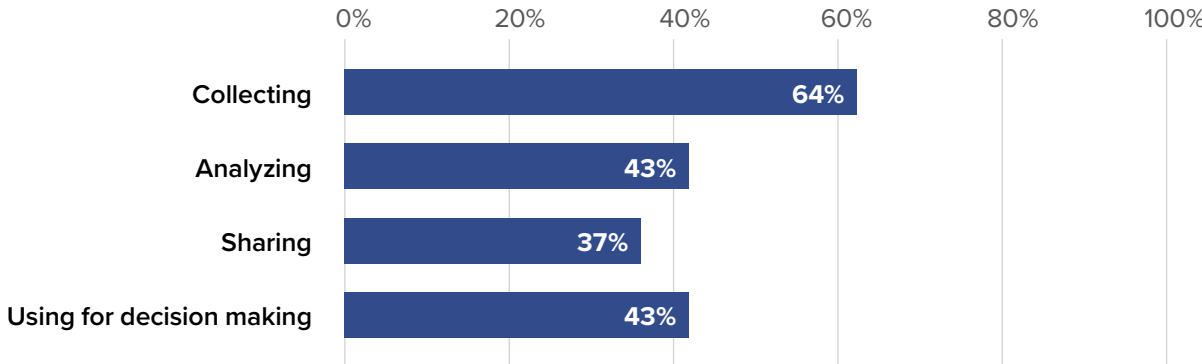
– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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Some partnerships described how their school district is transitioning to SchoolLinks, the new High School and Beyond platform. SchoolLinks has a lot of information from students and can be used as a tool to elevate and center student perspectives.

In an August 2025 virtual session, Education Northwest invited Limitless participants to respond to two data-related polls. The first focused on partnerships’ current data practices. Most respondents said they collect data, but fewer said they analyze or use data in decision making, and even fewer said they share data back with their community (figure 3).

**Figure 3. Most Limitless partnerships currently collect data, but fewer share data back with their communities**



Note: N = 76. Respondents could select more than one response to the following question: “How would you describe your partnership’s current data practices?”

Source: Education Northwest Zoom poll of participants during August 2025 Limitless virtual session.

The second poll asked what type of data support would be most helpful to partnerships. Nearly half of respondents (48%) said they would like support with interpreting and making meaning of data with their community (table 1). Based on this feedback, Education Northwest has designed the data working group and other data-related supports for partnerships.

**Table 1. Limitless partnerships want support around interpreting and making meaning of data with their communities**

Data domain	Response	Strategies
Interpretation and meaning making with community	48% (34 of 71)	Structured protocols for collaborative data reflection, meaning making with community, sharing your story with data
Data collection and analysis	41% (29 of 71)	Designing student, family, and staff surveys; participatory methods; support with systemic analysis
Use of technology	39% (28 of 71)	Increase awareness and adoption of emerging tools (e.g., FOYOST, Schoolinks, digital transcripts)
Inventory and data systems	34% (24 of 71)	Data asset mapping, understanding what data you currently have, support with data sharing and governance, accessing publicly available datasets
Use in decisions	34% (24 of 71)	Support in integrating data into action planning and implementation

Note: N = 71. Respondents could select more than one option.

Source: Education Northwest Zoom poll of participants during August 2025 Limitless virtual session.

Overall, Limitless partnerships have varying levels of data use and capacity. While some have a robust system for data collection and analysis, others are just beginning to use data or are in the early stages of building their team’s data capacity.

It is important that districts, colleges, and other partners proactively and consistently collaborate with students, families, and communities to understand their priorities, co-develop solutions, and provide feedback on programs. To gather this feedback, educators should not just collect data from students and families but also collaborate with students and families to collect data and make decisions (Ishimaru, 2020). This topic remains relevant for Limitless and is addressed through the data learning community, data-related technical assistance, and other networkwide trainings, such as the January 2026 virtual session on logic models.

**Implications for K–12 practitioners and leaders**

- Establish or strengthen data-sharing agreements with postsecondary partners to understand student outcomes beyond high school.
- Ensure data are shared back with your community and engage in collaborative meaning-making.

**Implications for postsecondary practitioners and leaders**

- Data-sharing should be bidirectional. Share enrollment and outcome data back with K–12 partners in accessible, actionable formats.

## Partnerships use and share strategies related to quality advising, with many focused on postsecondary exposure

The third goal of Limitless is to increase awareness of and improve access to strategies that support students' high school-to-postsecondary transitions. The Network also aims to support partnerships to implement these strategies in their regions. One key strategy is quality advising. Based on the annual Limitless survey administered by Sankofa Consulting, most Limitless members (92%) are working to improve advising in their region (Sankofa Consulting, 2025).

End-of-year reports highlighted a variety of activities, including college field trips and events that expose students to postsecondary options. Some partnerships focused on supporting specific groups of students who have historically faced the highest barriers to postsecondary success. For example, one partnership shared that they are working to increase a sense of belonging on a college campus for BIPOC students and students from low-income households. This partnership focused on coordinating college visits specifically for Latinx and Native high school students, featuring academic and cultural programming as well as time to meet with current college students.

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**“To strengthen advising and connection to postsecondary partners, [we] organized student field trips to local college campuses, allowing students to experience programs firsthand and meet instructors and see students/facilities.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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Some partnerships are implementing near-peer mentoring programs to support first-generation college students to access postsecondary education.

At one high school where a Limitless near-peer mentor program was implemented, 80 percent of the class of 2025 program participants enrolled in a two- or four-year college in fall 2025. At this same school, all students who participated in the program completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

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**“[We] used what we’ve learned from Limitless to help develop quality advising sessions both as 1:1s and as small group advisories.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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Partnerships described a wide variety of advising-related activities and programs to help students understand and prepare for life after high school. Examples include summer programs, career-connected learning activities, and developing and implementing a series of lessons designed to support students' High School and Beyond Plans.

Every student needs and deserves quality advising on postsecondary options from trusted adults and peers. Student sense of belonging (Korpershoek et al., 2020) and mentorship are associated with long-term well-being and college and career success (Eby & Dolan, 2015; Kitchen et al., 2025).

#### **Implications for K–12 practitioners and leaders**

- Implement comprehensive advising activities that align with High School and Beyond Plans and the High Quality College and Career Advising framework.
- Support counselors as well as informal mentors, teachers, and peer mentors that can advise students on postsecondary options.

#### **Implications for postsecondary practitioners and leaders**

- Partner with districts to support the continuity of high-quality and equitable advising practices across K–12 and postsecondary.
- Proactively and regularly share updated information relevant to K–12 advising with districts.

## **Financial aid awareness and completion remains an area of growth across the state; partnerships focused on culturally responsive outreach and FAFSA completion support**

Another priority strategy to improve high school-to-postsecondary transitions is increasing financial aid awareness and completion among high school students and families. FAFSA completion is associated with higher rates of postsecondary enrollment (DeBaun, 2019), and Washington lags behind other states in FAFSA completion rates (Fitzgerald, 2025). In the annual Limitless survey, most respondents (90%) reported working on financial aid. Across the Network, awareness of financial aid evidence-based strategies increased from 71 percent in 2024 to 85 percent in 2025. Understanding of how to implement financial aid strategies also increased, from 59 percent in 2024 to 81 percent in 2025.

Limitless partnerships described strategies they are using to increase completion of the FAFSA and Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA), for example, hosting bilingual family nights, pairing students with mentors, and holding community events to spread awareness of financial aid opportunities and help students and families to fill out financial aid forms.

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**“FAFSA and college application support increased through multiple information nights, individual appointments, and on-site assistance from financial aid staff.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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Several partnerships described how their efforts are having a real impact on FAFSA and WASFA completion rates in their communities, and some reported a documented percentage increase.

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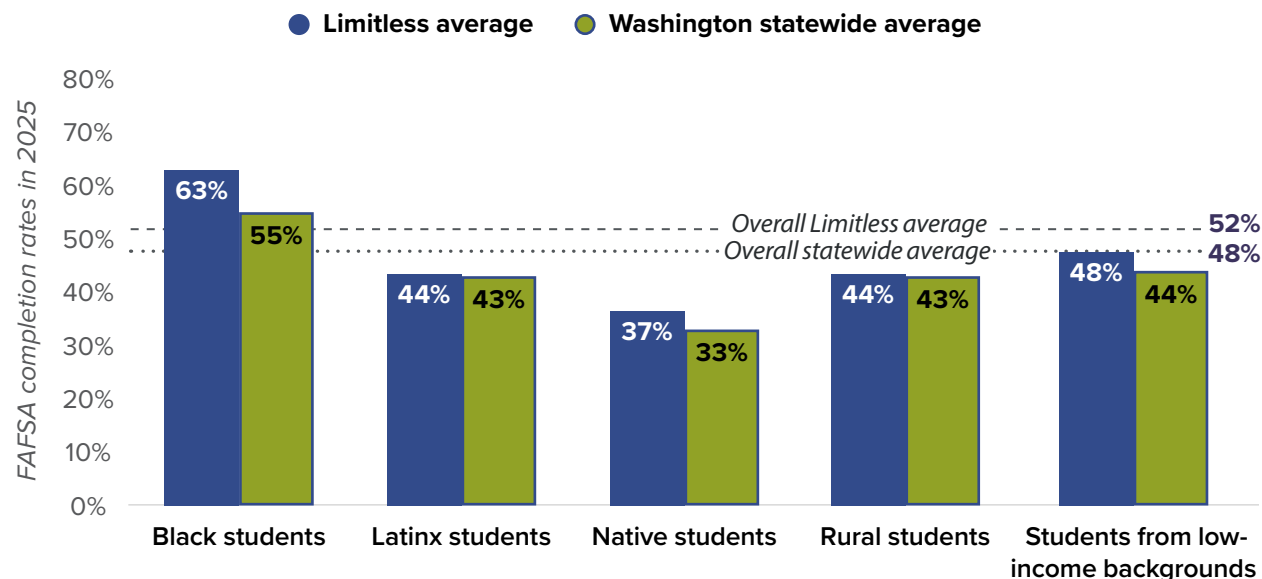
**“We’ve seen an increase in FAFSA completion rates of +6%—all of our schools outperformed the region.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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An analysis by Sankofa Consulting found that students in Limitless regions completed the FAFSA at higher rates than students in Washington state overall, but there is still work to be done to improve these rates. In 2025, 52 percent of all students in Limitless districts completed the FAFSA compared to 48 percent state-wide. Within Limitless districts there was an increase from 47 percent completion in 2024 to 52 percent in 2025. Black students in Limitless districts in particular completed the FAFSA at relatively high rates—63 percent in 2025—which is higher than the overall Limitless average (52%) and the statewide average for Black students (55%). However, some inequities persist within the Network. The 2025 FAFSA completion rates for Latinx (44%), Native (37%), rural (44%), and low-income (48%) students in Limitless highlight that more work is needed to remove barriers and support students and families with culturally responsive practices and outreach (figure 4).

**Figure 4. Students in Limitless regions completed the FAFSA at higher rates than students in Washington state overall**



Note: 2025 FAFSA completion rates based as of June 30, 2025.

1) WSAC does not report “low-income” as a demographic characteristic; Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) eligibility is used as a proxy indicator. FRL data provides useful context but may not fully capture all aspects of economic disadvantage and results should be interpreted with an understanding of these limitations. 2) If a region is designated as rural by OSPI, the value for rural student demographics is equivalent to the overall district rate, as “Rural” is a district-level characteristic rather than a student subgroup.

Source: An analysis by Sankofa Consulting.

With the statewide emphasis on financial aid completion (Fitzgerald, 2025), this will continue to be a priority for Limitless partnerships in the coming years. Washington has a generous system of financial aid, including for students who are undocumented, yet the state ranked 47th for FAFSA completion in 2025 (National College Attainment Network, n.d.). More work is needed to ensure that Washington students have equitable access to financial aid for their preferred postsecondary pathway and to overcome barriers to financial aid completion. Although these challenges persist, Limitless is demonstrating the power of collaboration, intentional planning, and alignment across systems.

**Implications for K–12 practitioners and leaders**

- Integrate FAFSA and WASFA completion support into existing school structures (e.g., advisory periods, counselor caseloads) rather than relying solely on one-time events.

**Implications for postsecondary practitioners and leaders**

- Deploy financial aid staff directly into high schools and community events, especially in communities with historically low FAFSA completion rates, rather than waiting for students to come to campus.

## Partnerships are working to increase access to meaningful dual credit opportunities that support postsecondary success

The third priority strategy is increasing access to dual credit for high school students. Districts across Washington increasingly offer these opportunities, given the demonstrated benefits of dual credit (Liu et al., 2022). On the annual Limitless survey, the majority of respondents (89%) reported working on dual credit, and partnerships described expanded dual credit offerings and articulations in their end-of-year reports. In addition, many partnerships work to ensure that students and families understand dual credit offerings, including how to transfer and use the credits. Some partnerships are developing transfer guides and associate degree credit tools for clearer pathways.

One partnership reported increasing College in the High School and other dual credit opportunities. As a result, they “improved the percentage of students earning dual credit from 74 percent in 2018 to 90 percent in 2025.”

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**“Dual credit articulations have increased from 106 credits to 166 available credits with six different colleges.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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Importantly, many partnerships are working to clarify dual credit opportunities and ensure that students take courses that align with their goals. For example, one partnership initially focused solely on increasing awareness of dual credit opportunities, but later expanded their focus to ensure meaningful pathway alignment. They explained, “We discovered that the transfer process [between high school and college] needed to be clarified and streamlined before marketing or scaling materials regionally.” Therefore, partnerships are not simply increasing access but also making sure dual credit opportunities are intentional and will support students on their postsecondary pathway. Dual credit courses, including career and technical education (CTE), are associated with better postsecondary outcomes (Lindsay et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2018). Increasing meaningful dual credit pathways and ensuring equitable access for students is an important strategy in improving high school-to-postsecondary transitions statewide.

### **Implications for K–12 practitioners and leaders**

- Together with postsecondary partners, audit current dual credit offerings to ensure they connect to meaningful postsecondary pathways. Access alone is not enough if the credits do not transfer or align with student goals.

### **Implications for postsecondary practitioners and leaders**

- Streamline enrollment, transcription, and credit transfer processes. Complexity at the institutional level creates confusion and inequity at the student level.

## Partnerships recognize that student and family engagement are essential to any effort to improve high school-to-postsecondary transitions

Across all strategies, student and family engagement are critical. Many partnerships have focused on authentically engaging students and families, for example, by hosting events for families, launching family academies, and using culturally responsive outreach strategies to engage students and families in postsecondary planning.

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**“A highlight of the year was our Dual Credit Information Evening, which brought together representatives from our local community college, College in the High School programs, the Skills Center, and the technical college. This event gave students and families a clear picture of the many opportunities available to earn college credit while still in high school and to explore multiple pathways beyond graduation.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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Some partnerships specifically mentioned the Limitless Family Engagement Working Group as a space where they have learned about effective and culturally responsive practices.

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**“[Family engagement] efforts are informed by Limitless convenings and the Family Engagement Working Group, and they reflect our recognition that families remain the most trusted source of information for students.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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When preparing students for college and career, family engagement is essential (Bergerson, 2009; Mapp et al., 2022). Limitless partnerships want to focus on this area and are interested in related resources or guidance. Importantly, student and family engagement are not add-ons or separate from the core work of schools, colleges, and community partners. Determining a post-high school plan is a family decision. As such, families and students should be engaged as decision makers and partners at every step of the way.

#### **Implications for community-based organizations**

- Leverage the trust you have established in the community to connect families and institutions. This can be especially important in Black, Latinx, and Native communities, as well as low-income and rural communities, who have not been well served by educational systems.
- Help partnerships move from collecting data about communities to collecting data with communities. Participatory data practices strengthen buy-in and surface insights that institutions may miss.
- Connect families to peer voices, such as recent graduates or near-peer mentors, who can speak credibly about the value of postsecondary pathways in their specific community context.

#### **Implications for K–12 and postsecondary practitioners and leaders**

- Build relationships and trust with students and families through authentic and equitable collaboration and shared decision-making.
- Partner with trusted community-based organizations.
- Honor students' and families' assets and ensure there are systemic opportunities for shared power.

# Systemic challenges remain in the high school-to-postsecondary ecosystem

While Limitless partnerships shared many accomplishments from their work together, challenges remain in ensuring a seamless and equitable high school-to-postsecondary transition for students.

## Staff capacity and turnover can make efforts to improve high school-to-postsecondary transitions more difficult

The most cited challenge was staff capacity and turnover. Many partnerships shared that they are being asked to do more with fewer resources. Community-based organizations, higher education institutions, and K–12 districts across the state have faced layoffs. This impacts the work, as there is less capacity and the remaining staff members are stretched thin.

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**“Staffing and resource constraints—particularly at the college level—have made it challenging to sustain every initiative at the scale we envision.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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Partnerships described how they are addressing these challenges: prioritizing high-impact strategies, bringing in new partners, holding regular planning meetings, and implementing onboarding processes when new staff members join a partnership or program. Some partnerships shared that increased enrollment has added pressure to short-staffed colleges with fewer resources. Other partnerships are working around bureaucratic barriers, for example, providing stipends for K–12 staff members who typically do not work during the summer so that they can continue collaborating with higher education.

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**“The main challenge we face now is finding time to sustain this work amid staff reductions and growing responsibilities. Despite these pressures, our team remains deeply committed to keeping this collaboration a priority.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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## Data-related challenges, siloed systems, and narratives about the value of postsecondary education can inhibit change

Partnerships also described delays in data sharing and the availability of data. Furthermore, some districts and institutions have limited capacity to collect and analyze data. Other partnerships described the siloed

nature of K–12 and postsecondary as a challenge as well as the complexity of the higher education system. One partnership explained, “Each college maintains different procedures for transcription and enrollment, creating confusion for students and staff.”

Many partnerships described how mindsets around the value of postsecondary education, which includes college, workforce preparation, and career certificate programs, can be a barrier. One partnership said, “Narratives around postsecondary attainment are often negative in our region, particularly around rising costs of college.” Students and families face various pressures, and many Limitless participants said it can be difficult to communicate the value of postsecondary credentials given the costs of college and students’ need to earn money right out of high school.

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**“Students in rural areas face unique structural and economic barriers to accessing postsecondary pathways. They typically have fewer nearby college options, limited access to financial aid advising, and may experience greater pressure to enter the workforce immediately after high school to support their families.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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## **Societal challenges including affordability and housing insecurity remain a barrier**

Partnerships also described larger, societal challenges in their end-of-year reports. In the current political environment, many families are worried about attending in-person events and completing the FAFSA. There is a general mistrust of institutions. Limitless partnerships are trying to navigate this, build trust, and continue to engage students and families, but they face continued barriers to engagement and systems that were not designed to partner with families.

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**“One ongoing challenge has been ensuring equitable participation, as some families face barriers to attending evening events or navigating complex financial aid systems.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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Partnerships also described how affordability concerns and housing insecurity can be barriers for students and families.

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**“Across our region, the most persistent barriers to postsecondary enrollment remain affordability, unclear or misaligned pathways, and uneven access to advising supports.”**

– Limitless partnership end-of-year report

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Lastly, some partnerships described sustainable funding as a challenge. Partnerships value this work, but many do not feel confident that it can continue without funding. In the final year of Limitless, partnerships hope to focus on this challenge so they can continue their efforts in some capacity.

# Implications for practice

The findings from Limitless partnerships point to several practical directions for educators, leaders, and organizations working to improve high school-to-postsecondary transitions across Washington. While strategies will vary by community and context, evidence from this network suggests that the following actions matter the most.

## **For K–12 practitioners and leaders**

Protected time for cross-sector collaboration is foundational. Without it, even well-designed partnerships struggle to move from relationship-building to action. School and district leaders can support this work by treating Limitless partnership activities as core professional responsibilities, rather than add-ons, and by investing in data infrastructure that allows student outcomes to be tracked beyond high school graduation. Integrating FAFSA and WASFA completion support into existing counseling and advisory structures, rather than relying on standalone events, is one of the highest-leverage steps districts can take given Washington's persistently low completion rates.

## **For postsecondary practitioners and leaders**

Colleges and universities play a critical role in making partnership work sustainable. Designating a consistent institutional point of contact for K–12 partnerships, formalizing data-sharing agreements, and simplifying dual credit enrollment and transfer processes are concrete steps that reduce confusion for students and staff alike. Institutions can also support equity goals by actively deploying financial aid staff into high schools and community settings in underserved areas, rather than waiting for students to seek out that support on campus.

## **For community-based organizations**

Community-based organizations are uniquely positioned to build trust with students and families. Offering postsecondary planning support, including financial aid assistance, in community settings, in multiple languages, and through trusted messengers can help reach students and families who are least likely to benefit from school- or campus-based outreach alone. Organizations can also strengthen Limitless partnerships by advocating for genuine family and student voice in planning and decision-making processes, not just as feedback sources after the fact.

## **For policymakers**

The Limitless Learning Network has demonstrated that place-based, cross-sector collaboration can move the needle on student outcomes, particularly around FAFSA completion and dual credit access. Sustaining and scaling these gains will require policy attention to three persistent challenges documented in this

report: staff capacity and turnover across K–12 and higher education, data-sharing barriers between systems, and the absence of sustainable funding for regional partnership infrastructure. Investments in these areas would help Washington build on the momentum Limitless has generated.

Across all these audiences, the students and families at the center of this work are best served when systems align, when support is proactive rather than reactive, and when communities are treated as partners rather than recipients. The recommendations above can help Washington become a state where more young people, particularly those who have historically faced the greatest barriers, can access and succeed in post-secondary education.

## Looking ahead

In end-of-year reports, partnerships discussed what they would like to learn from Limitless. Some partnerships would like resources for aligning dual credit and certificate pathways with postsecondary institutions. Others requested culturally responsive family engagement strategies. Many partnerships asked for resources and tools they can use in their community to shift narratives around the value of postsecondary education. Education practitioners across the state are eager for guidance on data-sharing agreements and how to identify actionable metrics for equity-focused outcomes in this space. Finally, some partnerships asked for technical assistance for building coherent pathways and policy advocacy for increased funding and systemic alignment. In the final year of Limitless, our priority is to meet these needs identified by partnerships and support practitioners to drive change at various levels.

The Limitless Learning Network is making a difference because of the dedication of students, families, educators, policymakers, and others invested in postsecondary success for students across the state. Washington has all the elements for a robust and equitable postsecondary transition ecosystem: regional partnerships collaborating across systems to drive impact, generous financial aid (Washington Student Achievement Council, n.d.-b), and a commitment to equitable postsecondary access shared by K–12 districts and postsecondary institutions statewide. Most importantly, Washington students are working hard and preparing for their future.

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