

Seattle Promise gains ground in higher education

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By [The Seattle Times editorial board](#)

Nearly one in four of Seattle Public School 2020 graduates have access to two years of tuition-free college or professional training, thanks to the Seattle Promise program.

That's particularly important for bolstering enrollment as it [slumps at most state colleges](#) and fewer Washington students [apply for financial aid](#) in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Clearly, too few students are planning for higher education. Seattle Promise offers a model for other Washington communities looking to boost students' access to higher learning and career success.

Despite generous state student aid programs, Washington has a troubling gap between workers' skills and existing job requirements. Employers increasingly want to hire applicants who have some postsecondary education, but only about 40% of Washington high school graduates earn a college degree or other vocational credential [by age 26](#). The Washington Roundtable and its education foundation, Partnership for Learning, have set a goal of raising that figure to 70% of Washington's high school class of 2030, but progress has been slow.

Seattle Promise, created in partnership between the City of Seattle, Seattle Colleges and Seattle Public Schools, and funded by voters in 2018, offers a useful case study in how communities might get more young people connected to higher learning. In two years, 846 Seattle students have enrolled. The program covers the remaining tuition cost — after other scholarships grants and public funding has been applied — of up to 90 credits at any Seattle College. Unlike the Washington College Grant and federal Pell Grant programs, Seattle Promise is available to every Seattle student, regardless of income. That makes it a useful complement to state and federal need-based grants.

But the program's success can't be attributed solely to the money. In 2019, state lawmakers made the Washington College Grant program [an entitlement](#), meaning that any state resident who qualifies can receive assistance with apprenticeship fees and up to full tuition at one of dozens of Washington colleges and universities. Even so, as The Seattle Times Education Lab recently reported, there are troubling signs that students aren't taking advantage of the opportunity during the pandemic.

Experts say there are many contributors to the problem, including pandemic-related uncertainty and a lack of awareness about available resources. But if a student doesn't see higher education as a realistic and attainable goal, no amount of financial aid will entice him or her to enroll. That's where well-supported local partnerships can help pick up the slack.

More than money, Seattle Promise represents a mindset, that young people's success is a collective responsibility.

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