

2025

Multi-Series Case Study

DRIVING SYSTEMIC CHANGE & ADVANCING POSTSECONDARY ACCESS THROUGH REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP

*Improving Student Access in South King County by Shifting
Highline College's Admissions Timeline and Establishing a
Regional Data-Sharing System*

Multi-Series Case Study Report

This report is the first installment in a multi-part case study series highlighting how regional partners in South King County are advancing systems change to improve postsecondary transitions. Each case in the series lifts concrete examples of how backbone leadership, cross-sector collaboration, and targeted universalism translate into institutional and policy shifts that benefit students. The goal of the series is twofold:

1. To document how the regional partnership is moving from programs to systemic solutions.
2. To provide practical lessons and replicable models that other regions can adapt to strengthen equitable access and outcomes for students.

Executive Summary

- * This first installment details the coordinated systems-change work led by the Postsecondary Operations Division of the Puget Sound Education Service District (**PSESD**) and its partner K–12 school districts and postsecondary institution—**Federal Way Public Schools, Highline Public Schools, and Tukwila School District, and Highline College**—through their participation in the Limitless Learning Network (LLN)¹ and the Horizons Regional Partnership². The work demonstrates advancing systems change and creating conditions for improving student outcomes in the region.
- * At the center of this progress was PSESD’s backbone role, led by Dr. Elizabeth (Liz) Cook, who provided the convening power, coordination, and strategic support necessary to move institutions toward aligned action. **Through this shared effort, the partnership achieved changes that no single institution could have accomplished alone: Highline College shifted its admissions timeline to better align with district advising practices, and the region executed a cross-sector data-sharing agreement to track student transitions.**
- * The case provides a clear example of targeted universalism*—where an action taken to address barriers for Latinx students improved access and clarity for all students in the region.
- * The initiative demonstrates a clear impact pathway, from regional alignment and shared framing to policy change at the institutional level, to improved advising conditions for students. It reflects how **coordinated partnership efforts can result in timelier student enrollment, improved alignment between K–12 and college processes, and clearer data-sharing systems to support ongoing collaboration.**

***Targeted Universalism** is an approach that sets a shared universal goal for all groups while designing differentiated strategies that respond to each group’s unique conditions and barriers. Definition adapted from the [Othering & Belonging Institute](#) (OBI), John A. Powell.

Advancing Postsecondary Access through Regional Partnership and Systemic Change

Improving Student Access in South King County by Shifting Highline College’s Admissions Timeline and Establishing a Regional Data-Sharing System

Over the past year, as part of the Limitless Learning Network (LLN)¹ and the Horizons Regional Partnership,² local leaders in South King County, Washington, pursued targeted systems change to improve postsecondary transitions for students, particularly those furthest from opportunity. **This case study outlines the coordinated actions of the regional partnership to address structural barriers and align institutional policies and supports for student success.**

South King County, located just south of Seattle, is a diverse region home to one of the state’s highest concentrations of students of color and multilingual learners. Within the region, **a partnership involving three public school districts: Federal Way Public Schools (FWPS), Highline Public Schools (HPS), and Tukwila School District (TSD), works closely with Highline College, the area’s primary local postsecondary institution, to expand postsecondary opportunities for their students.** Each district has established a foundation for college and career planning, which includes campus visits, dual credit, and summer learning opportunities, designed to enhance postsecondary awareness and readiness. Yet in their shared work in the Limitless Learning Network and Horizons, partners recognized that programs alone were not enough; deeper systemic barriers stood in the way of equitable enrollment.

Through discussions in the LLN, partners chose to center their strategies on Hispanic and Latinx students, who make up about **37% of South King County’s student population** and represent a growing share of the region’s future workforce. Across Washington State, graduation rates among Latinx students are

steadily increasing but they continue to face systemic barriers to college access—such as economic instability, language barriers, and limited access to bilingual or culturally responsive supports. **Nearly half of Latinx graduates in Washington do not enroll in college within a year of graduation,**³ reflecting broader opportunity gaps shaped by structural conditions rather than student ability. In a region defined by linguistic and cultural diversity, partners saw this focus as both a responsibility to remove barriers and an opportunity to design systems that benefit all students.

Building on these regional conversations, local education leaders, Dr. Maribel Jimenez, *Vice President for Equity, Diversity, and Transformation* at Highline College, partnered with Dr. Eric Hong, *Executive Director of College & Career Readiness* from FWPS, and Janet Blanford, *Director of Secondary Success, College & Career Readiness* at HPS. Together, they reviewed demographic data that highlighted persistent enrollment gaps for Latinx students across the region and further brainstormed new strategies to better serve them.

In response, the team designed a short pilot program to provide Latinx scholars in FWPS with early exposure to Highline College.

1. The Limitless Learning Network (LLN) is a statewide effort of 26 local partnerships in Washington to improve student transitions from high school to postsecondary education. The network supports practitioners, including college and career readiness staff, higher education enrollment teams, and nonprofits, helping them collaborate, share best practices, strengthen partnerships, utilize data to inform decisions, and increase postsecondary enrollment.

2. The Horizons Regional Program is a multi-year effort supporting four regional partnerships comprised of school districts, postsecondary institutions, workforce organizations, Educational Service Districts, and/or community organizations to strengthen student-centered strategies including: advising, increase FAFSA/WAFSA completion, and dual credit, while building regional systems that improve enrollment in post-secondary education, credentials, and apprenticeships. Partnerships receive technical assistance to ensure continuous improvement, capacity-building, and equity-centered practices.

**Both initiatives are funded by the Gates Foundation (2023–2027)*

3. Social & Economic Sciences Research Center, *Hispanic and Latinx Students Educational Opportunity Gaps Study: Technical Report 25-20* (Pullman, WA: Washington State University, 2024), prepared for the Commission on Hispanic Affairs.

Strong participation, responsive supports, and Highline College’s intentional efforts to create a welcoming environment together demonstrated the pilot’s promise. By creating a culturally responsive day program for Latinx students, rising scholars were able to see themselves as future students at the College, engage with diverse faculty, and benefit from enriching programming throughout the day. Highline College recognized that while they could build a ‘program’ similar to the pilot, institutional change was ultimately needed to serve the region at scale. This early success affirmed the need for changes that could extend beyond a single pilot.

In parallel with this momentum, leaders at Highline College—most notably through Dr. Jimenez’s sustained efforts over the past 1.5 years—are working to secure a formal Hispanic⁴-Serving Institution (HSI) designation.

- To qualify as an HSI, an institution must:
- ★ Be an accredited, degree-granting public or private nonprofit institution
 - ★ Have at least 25% Hispanic/Latinx full-time equivalent undergraduate enrollment
 - ★ Serve a high proportion of low-income students, often measured by Pell Grant eligibility

While an HSI designation allows institutions to be eligible for Title V funding to strengthen programs and student services, Dr. Jimenez emphasized that Highline’s goal extends beyond eligibility. The college is committed to cultivating a culture of “servingness,” which is intended to create an ideal environment where Latinx students feel supported, affirmed, and integral to the institution’s mission. In addition to pursuing the HSI designation, Highline has also been nominated for consideration of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, the nation’s premier recognition of high achievement and performance among two-year colleges further underscoring its commitment to student success. While these efforts align with the partnership’s goals

within the LLN, Highline’s focus on becoming an HSI and strengthening culturally responsive supports for all students predates the partnership and is reflective of the ways that students from all diverse backgrounds contribute to a thriving campus community in incalculable ways.

In alignment with that vision, Highline College independently launched **Juntos** in Fall 2024, a learning community for incoming Latinx/Hispanic⁴/ Latina/o/e-identified students. Juntos provides culturally grounded support, including mentorship, peer networks, financial aid and scholarship guidance, transfer planning, and responsive programming. Its core values—**Familia** (Family), **Échale Ganas** (Give It All You’ve Got), **Ponte las Pilas** (Work Hard), and **Valentía** (Courage)—reflect a commitment to affirming student identity, agency, and persistence.

Challenging Assumptions: A Shift in Framing

As the pursuit of an HSI designation advanced, partners began examining structural barriers affecting enrollment more closely. **One key issue that surfaced was the misalignment between high school college planning timelines and Highline College’s application window.** The Fall term application typically did not open until March or April, after most students had applied to other institutions.

In early discussions, district partners noted that part of the delay stemmed from a longstanding perception of Highline College as a “safety school” or fallback option, rather than a first-choice destination. Left unchallenged, this framing had shaped institutional practices, reinforcing later timelines and lower visibility in early advising.

4. “Hispanic” broadly refers to people of Spanish-speaking descent, while “Latino/a” (or the more gender-neutral term “Latinx”) refers to residents of the U.S. who trace their ancestry to Latin America. While many students prefer the term Latinx; in the Higher Education Act, which defines Hispanic-Serving Institutions, the term Hispanic is used. Moreover, the government uses the terms Hispanic and Latino interchangeably in the census. In the absence of consensus and in order to be inclusive in our terminology, we often use both terms.

Through Limitless as a platform for discussion, partners interrogated this assumption directly. District and college partners questioned whether this perception matched student needs or institutional commitments.

That moment marked a turning point. **Rather than accepting the “safety school” narrative as fixed, partners asked what it would take for Highline College to be fully integrated into early advising and application planning.** Implicit in their new strategy was the idea that Highline should be positioned as a first-choice or target school, especially for students who could benefit most from high-quality, affordable local options. Reframing this narrative helped build momentum for systemic change.

Coordinated Action: Adjusting the Application Timeline

This recognition led directly to concrete planning. Partners clarified the timeline for colleges. While ctcLink (Washington’s centralized student information and administrative system) is managed by the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), each institution controls its own application opening dates. A review of colleges such as Yakima Valley, Walla Walla, and Skagit Valley confirmed this flexibility.

With this understanding, Dr. Elizabeth (Liz) Cook, *Director of Postsecondary Operations* at the Puget Sound Educational Service District (PSESD) and the backbone lead for the Horizons Regional Partnership in South King County, and Dr. Jimenez organized a coordinated strategy to incorporate these lessons into concrete policy changes. Together, they facilitated cross-sector conversations, and Dr. Cook further authored a letter acknowledging Highline College’s efforts to support Latinx students and pursue HSI status.

With Dr. Cook’s support, all three district partners’ superintendents—Dr. Dani Pfeiffer

(FWPS), Dr. Ivan Duran (HPS), and Dr. Concie Pedroza (TSD)—co-signed a Letter of Support for Highline College. The letter affirmed longstanding connections with the college through programs such as Running Start, dual credit Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses, and the hiring of Highline alumni as teachers. It also called for aligning the college’s enrollment process with district advising timelines. This change aligned with the timelines of most four-year colleges and school district timelines for college application due dates, making it easier for students to consider Highline College alongside other postsecondary options.

In response, Highline College shifted its admissions timeline for Fall 2025 to open on October 1, 2024, applying universally to all students, not only LatinX students or those from participating Horizons districts, illustrating a targeted universalism approach: addressing a specific equity challenge in a way that benefits the broader student population.



Advancing Shared Measurement and Regional Data Capacity

Following the admissions timeline change, the partnership transitioned to another priority: developing the ability to track students who apply to and enroll at Highline College. This work was intended to understand whether recent supports—such as timeline shifts and Cultural Learning Communities such as

Juntos—were associated with changes in student postsecondary transitions.

This step aligned with the broader goal of building regional data capacity to support shared learning and continuous improvement. It also reflected ongoing priorities within the Horizons Regional Partnership and the Limitless Learning Network, both of which emphasize the importance of cross-sector data use. To move this work forward, the partners addressed a commonly held concern: **colleges face significant barriers to sharing student-level outcomes data with K–12 systems. This concern has often discouraged coordination, even when technical solutions are available.**

Through the Limitless Learning Network, the partnership connected with Scott Kerwien, *Chief of Student Success at Spokane Public Schools*, who had developed a template Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and Data Sharing Agreement (DSA) to support compliant cross-sector student data sharing. The partnership adapted the template for local use, and the finalized agreement was shared with Federal Way Public Schools, Highline Public Schools, Tukwila School District, and Highline College, for execution. By May 2025, all the districts had the DSAs signed and confirmed.

The agreements make it possible to track key student transition points from partner high schools to the college—like application, enrollment, Financial Aid concerns, and persistence. Building on this foundation, the partnership developed a dashboard that brings these data points together in one place and is now in beta testing. Even at this early stage, the effort is opening new possibilities: districts can begin to see where students are in their postsecondary journey, such as those still waiting on financial aid decisions. Turning this visibility into stronger coordination and support is the next opportunity ahead.

Conclusion

The coordinated actions led by Dr. Cook (Postsecondary Operations), partner K–12 districts, and Highline College demonstrate how regional collaboration can meaningfully address systemic barriers to postsecondary access. Changes such as the adjusted admissions timeline and the development of a shared data infrastructure show measurable progress toward aligning policies and supports.

The partnership approached this work with intentionality—recognizing that creating more programs is not enough, and that true equity requires dismantling the structural barriers that programs alone cannot solve. While initiated to improve outcomes for Latinx students, these efforts apply broadly, benefiting all students in the region. The partnership’s work provides a replicable model for advancing equitable access through sustained, cross-sector alignment.

About the Regional Partnership



The **Horizons Regional Partnership in South King County (SKC)** is convened by the **Puget Sound Educational Service District (PSESD)**. The PSESD Postsecondary Operations provides backbone leadership by coordinating cross-sector collaboration and works closely with Community Center for Education Results to support these efforts as the Local Measure, Learning & Evaluation and Local Data Intermediary partners.

Through Horizons, SKC also partners with community-based organizations including Choose 180, African Community Housing & Development, Latino Civic Alliance, College Possible, Pacific Islander Community Association of WA, the Urban League of Seattle and more. Together, all institutions in the partnership are committed to expanding culturally responsive advising and implementation practices that help students transition from high school into postsecondary education—whether through apprenticeships, certificates, or college degrees.



Federal Way Public Schools serves more than 21,500 students across 37 schools in South King County. Students at Federal Way represent over 120 languages and cultures. FWPS is focused on equity, scholar voice, and preparing every student for college, career, and life after graduation.
<https://www.fwps.org/>



Highline College is a public college serving the South King County region. Established in 1961, it offers a wide range of academic pathways, including associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, professional certificates, and transfer programs. The college provides workforce training, community education, and student support services designed to promote access, persistence, and success.
<https://www.highline.edu/index.html>



Highline Public Schools serves approximately 17,500 students in the communities of Burien, Des Moines, Normandy Park, SeaTac, and White Center. The district is one of the most diverse in Washington State, with students speaking more than 100 languages. Highline is committed to equity, family engagement, and preparing all students for success in college, career, and citizenship.
<https://www.highlineschools.org/>



Puget Sound Educational Service District (PSESD) is 1 of 9 regional educational agencies in Washington working to eliminate opportunity gaps and ensure success for each child by partnering with school districts, tribal compact schools, charter and private schools, families, communities, Sovereign Nations, BIPOC groups, businesses, and public and private organizations to provide equitable services, innovative practices, and racially just educational systems.
<https://www.psesd.org>



Tukwila School District is a small district serving over 2,700 students in South King County. Recognized as one of the most multicultural districts in the nation, its students collectively speak more than 80 languages. The district is committed to equity, inclusion, and providing personalized learning experiences that prepare every student for success beyond high school.
<https://www.tukwilaschools.org/>



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The South King County Partnership's mission is to **ensure that Black and Brown male scholars in our region have access to equitable postsecondary advising, leading to attainment in a career for economic mobility.**

Statement of Purpose 2025