

Making the Case: Elevating Youth Perspectives

Connecting Systems to Student Needs





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Introduction

The Tacoma community has numerous organizations working to support youth on their pathways in life after high school. Yet less than half of Tacoma seniors graduating in 2021 enrolled in higher education institutions within a year of graduation. We lack consistent data on the number of students who enroll in apprenticeships or directly enter the workforce, but we know the number of “opportunity youth” disconnected from school and the workforce is on the rise. Simply providing resources does not ensure that youth can access what is available, and – like so many of our partners – we at the Foundation for Tacoma Students (FFTS) experience numerous challenges when connecting youth with existing resources. To address these challenges, it is critical to center student voices.

In 2022, the City of Tacoma commissioned FFTS to complete a research project exploring the barriers and opportunities in connecting local youth to postsecondary pathways. The project aimed to collect student perspectives about support for college and career planning, to improve existing resources, and understand barriers to student success. FFTS created a research design in Winter 2023, emphasizing students often less centered in this kind of research, then spent Spring 2023 conducting focus groups and interviews with students around Tacoma.

Our research explored who supported or hindered students in their postsecondary planning, how students learned of resources, and opportunities for systems change to better support youth on their postsecondary journeys. Four common themes surfaced:

1. The unique role of teachers.
2. The ways students discover resources.
3. The impact of school environments on students’ perceptions of themselves.
4. The importance of both basic needs and life skills.

Incorporating these learnings into our systems is critical to creating an environment where all Tacoma youth can pursue their desired pathway and thrive in life after high school. This report highlights our key learnings and recommendations to inform practices within schools, local municipalities, other government agencies, and community organizations operating inside and outside of traditional school environments.

Process & Methodology

To elevate student voice, FFTS prioritized interviewing students with adverse experiences or less likely to be on a traditional “college track” while in high school. We identified youth ages 16-24 through four community partners who work with at least one of the following populations: re-engaged learners, court-involved youth, and youth with underrepresented identities (BIPOC, LGBTQ+). We also received several inquiries through direct referral. Depending on the community partner’s program model and student preference, we either conducted one-on-one interviews or larger student focus groups.

Through this process, we:

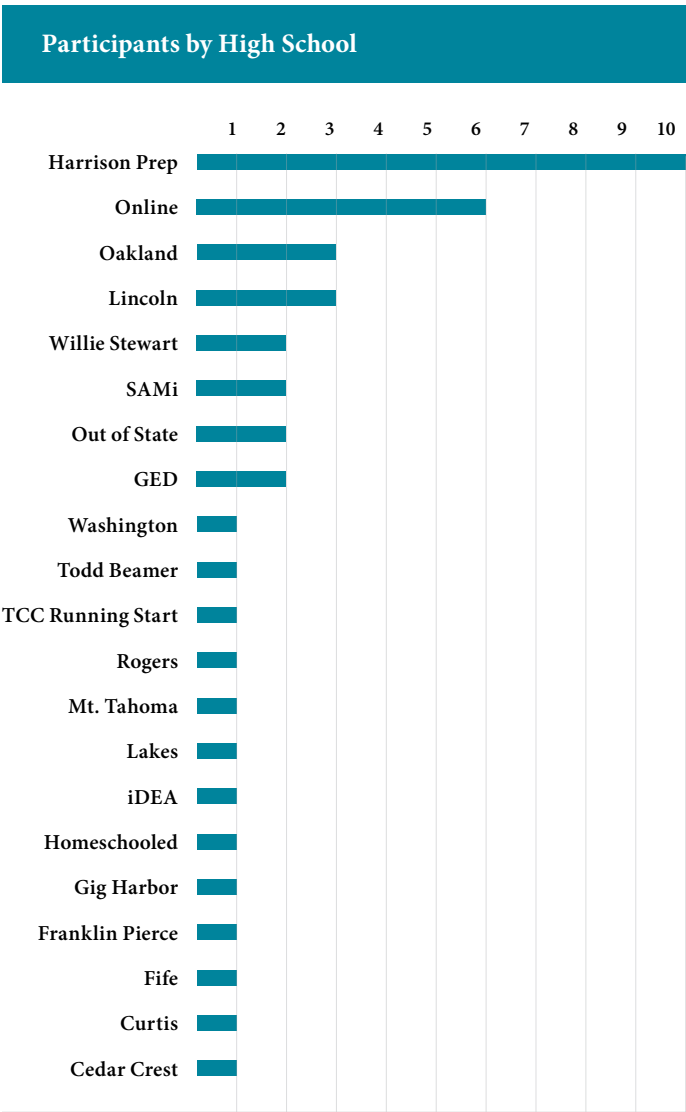
- Conducted four focus groups with 26 different youth
- Interviewed seven youth in one-on-one environments
- Engaged 33 youth in total

Of the 33 youth:

- 24 were current high school students
- 5 were current college students
- 3 were pursuing careers
- 1 was completing a GED

Participants had spent time at a variety of schools in Pierce County and even some out of state, as shown in the table below. Of the 33 youth participants, 11 attended multiple high schools, sometimes crossing school district boundaries. A student is counted under each high school they attended and thus may be represented on the chart below more than once:

¹This information is tracked in our College Enrollment and Completion dashboards, via the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). Learn more at www.graduatetacoma.org/data



We purposefully did not ask students to explicitly identify under specific demographic identities or experiences, but these were often revealed organically during the interview process. The pool of respondents was also generally more diverse than the distribution of students in Tacoma Public Schools, partially as a result of our selecting organizations serving more historically marginalized populations. As we will explore later, there was significant similarity in underlying issues students faced and opinions they expressed, despite and at times because of their diversity. Still, their unique contexts clearly structured their experiences and led to important, concrete learnings in our work. From conversations with the youth, several distinct identities emerged that inform this report:

| Student Type | Number of Students |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| Family Challenges | 3 |
| Income of family | 1 |
| Gender/LGBTQ+ | 9 |
| Homeless | 1 |
| Domestic Abuse | 1 |
| Mental Health | 7 |
| Immigrant | 1 |
| Substance Abuse | 1 |
| Neurodiverse | 2 |

Interviews and focus groups concentrated on four primary questions:

1. How did you feel about your experience with high school education?
2. Were there specific people or resources during your high school years that have helped support or held you back from your hopes for life after high school?
3. What do you know about the programs or resources available to help you with college or career planning? Have you accessed any or been invited to use them? If so, was anything about your experience particularly helpful or harmful?
4. If you heard about some resources or started exploring them but didn't follow through, what caused you to stop? Could something have been offered differently or improved?

While it was not originally planned, we also integrated a question on systems change recommendations early in the process:

5. Knowing that this information will be shared with decision-makers and changemakers throughout Tacoma, what would you like to share with them about ways the system could be improved?

A copy of the interview and focus group protocol is provided in Appendix A.

■ Research Findings

Youth shared a number of valuable insights throughout the research process. These have been summarized below according to the research question. A detailed count of responses by question is provided in Appendix B.

Who do students see as supporting or hindering their hopes for life after high school?

Teachers hold a unique power to tear down or build up students, and youth notice the difference.

We asked youth who supported or hindered them in pursuit of their postsecondary goals; the common response to both questions was teachers. Of the 33 youth interviewed, 16 (~50%) identified one or two teachers that either made them feel uniquely welcomed, valued, and supported or left them feeling belittled, disrespected, and unworthy. Of those 16, four mentioned teachers who hurt them, seven mentioned teachers who helped them, and five mentioned different teachers for both categories. This was true across high schools, demographic groups, and lived experiences.

While the specifics of what created a negative experience with a teacher varied, the common thread was a sense that teachers did not believe in a student's capacity to succeed. Surprisingly, several students spoke compassionately about the structural constraints and life challenges teachers faced that may drive this negative attitude. But they also noted many cases where teachers explicitly voiced this lack of belief to students directly, often singling out them or other individuals.

When commenting on facing racism from teachers, one student shared:

"...No middle schooler should be told that they will never find success and never graduate, and they should, like, plan for that and stuff like that. [There was] a lot of fundamental attribution error -- a lot of teachers telling me, like, you are not smart, inherently. And the reality is that nobody is inherently anything. It is about the environment. It is about the ability to succeed. And when you are not given the ability to succeed, you are not going to find it regardless of whatever personal attributes you have."

Unfortunately, this experience did not seem to be uncommon. Another youth shared a similar story:

"I have one specific example of a teacher who worked at the junior high who told one of my friends they deserved to fail in front of the whole class. And it's, like, someone with that type of attitude does not deserve to be around children. It's like, how are you going to say that to someone? And they had learning disabilities; they had an IEP. How awful do you have to be to say that to a child?"

What is most noteworthy about these stories is that both were shared by current college students who could still remember the pain of their teacher's words many years later. Of course, we do not know what was going on for these teachers at that time. They were interacting with students who themselves admitted to often being absent from school or behind on schoolwork. It's possible the teachers were frustrated and thought they were giving the student a needed wake-up call. But their words had lasting effects, and we need teachers to deeply know and understand the impact of their words. As one youth eloquently said: "Kids are little shits. That's for sure. But adults can be big shits, and you have got to keep that in mind. The things that they say to us stick with us just as much as the things we say to them."

Even as students described the deep hurt experienced by teachers' words, youth also shared incredible stories of being built up by teachers. The capacity for teachers to tear students down is just as significant as the capacity for teachers to support and empower.

One student shared about a teacher who had gone above and beyond:

"I was in an ESL class for two years of high school...and I had a teacher who was also a mentor for me who was helping me. Aside from teaching me English and practicing by writing essays and all of that, she would give me websites to look for colleges... She did help me a lot. She was there for me, as I would say, as a mom."

Another student interested in the trades after high school had struggled to find support from teachers since so few were familiar with that career path. But a particular teacher went out of their way to support them: "he just really met me where I was at. He was like, well, if this is what you want to do after school, then we are going to try to do everything we can for that." Despite not knowing much about the trades, this one



teacher was willing to help the student figure out the pathway, embarking on the journey together and leaving a strong impression on the student.

A teacher's power to influence a student's perspective of themselves cannot be understated.

|| ***School Administrators, Families, and CBOs also play a role in supporting and hindering youth.***

Students often mentioned other individuals or groups supporting or hindering them in pursuit of their goals. Family and school administrative staff showed up on both lists. In two different focus groups, students identified attention from “school moms” as being incredibly supportive. While the youth themselves were unable to identify the formal role of these “school moms” they were very excited to describe an attentive, compassionate adult who was there for them to talk to about their needs:

“She is basically like a mom. She sits there and listens and stuff like that.”

“She just helps with everything.”

Others mentioned counselors as filling a similar role. One student explained how a counselor had generally been

supportive, particularly as that student was dealing with mental health issues by providing a safe space for listening: “She lets me decompress ... she's really nice to talk to.”

Roughly one-third of students also pointed to the power of clubs and organizations to support and build them up. Students felt the strongest about the sense of belonging they developed in identity-based organizations (such as Hispanic/Latinx or LGBTQ+ groups). But they also commented on how both identity groups or more practical skill-building or academic programs connected them either to other youth or to numerous additional resources. There was particular love for some of our partner organizations, and the great work they have done to support our students through often very challenging situations.

How do students connect to resources?

|| ***Students most commonly learn of resources when they are shared in a space that a student is already required to be.***

Roughly one-third of youth (9 of 33) reported hearing about a resource when it was presented in a required space. Participating Willie Stewart students described resource presentations that helped connect them to resources, such as Northwest Education Access and Peace Community Center. Similarly, Fresh Start



TCC students reported that required resource presentations informed them of various supports at TCC and around the community. This model seems effective for connecting students to supports and increasing resource utilization.

There were also a number of youth who were required to use a resource by court order. This generally applied to mental health and substance use supports. Still, several of the students in these situations reported finding these resources useful or continued availing themselves of the resource even after the court-reported period had ended. While forcing students to use a resource presents its own challenges, it is noteworthy that it served at least some students well, and these spaces could be leveraged to connect students to additional supports.

Students also frequently learn of resources through trusted sources, whether friends, teachers, counselors, or other trusted adults.

Students relied on these trusted sources for a range of resource information, including information about programs like Fresh Start, FAFSA completion support, ways to get a free laptop, etc. Friends and family played a unique role in making students aware of alternative school options like Willie Stewart and Running Start. In these cases, a sibling or friend had often attended one of the two programs, making students aware that the option could also be a good fit for them. Social networks are a strong source of program information, referral, and potentially overcoming stigmatization.

Some students identified resources through self-directed internet research.

Students shared stories of finding resources through the internet, particularly when their circumstances had become

challenging, or they were receiving such little support from adults that they needed to look for options themselves. One student explained how a difficult home life situation forced them to drop out of high school. They then used the internet to identify resources and support to continue their education when nobody else had provided options. Another student described feeling so depressed and alienated at high school for their sexual identity that they finally looked online for resources that ultimately connected them to the queer community in Tacoma.

A third student faced significant opposition from their family in pursuing a postsecondary degree and had to navigate postsecondary planning on her own. This student learned from a TikTok video that libraries could provide resources to students interested in college. They then emailed their local librarian, asking for support. The librarian responded with a long list of resources, which the student then pursued. As the student described, “Funny enough, I knew this from TikTok. And TikTok [said]... if you are a student and want to look for resources, your local library is the best place to start. And I was like, okay, I will try it out.” While this was a unique story among the youth we interviewed, it was an interesting case study in the power of the internet to empower motivated youth.

While this self-direction is a sign of resilience, it often occurs when systems fail to provide students with the support they should have already had. It seems likely that for each student who has a story of impressive self-direction, there are many others in similar situations unable to connect with the needed resources because life situations are too challenging. A couple of interviewees expressed worrying that others would not share their luck or success in navigating such systems.

What do youth want decisionmakers to know?

Disciplinary cultures and carceral structures have long-lasting effects.

Students notice when schools are treated as carceral environments and when some or all within a group are treated with mistrust. Youth repeatedly shared stories of strict school rules and differential discipline for students committing the same offense that eroded feelings of value and belonging. In

one focus group, several students from different high schools described rigid rules around when bathrooms are open and having to undergo searches before being allowed to enter the restroom. These strict rules around a simple human need created a tense environment for these students. Similarly, one student described the intense measures undertaken to clamp down on vaping on campus:

“At my school, they put up these gates. So they lock them during lunch because vaping...I get it; it’s a big deal. But by doing that, it’s going to make kids do it more. It’s not helping anything. Taking a kid’s vape away and suspending them isn’t going to do any benefit to them. It just makes them depressed. You are telling them, hey, you are actually functioning in school, but you are vaping. So we are going to take away your privilege to go to school and your education because we found a dab pen in your locker. Like, it’s stupid.”

Discipline, in general, was a fraught topic for many students. Multiple students across groups mentioned clear differences in discipline for different students who had committed the same offense, creating a sense of mistrust between students and administration. Another student, who was suspended for fighting, shared how the administration never told them when they would be allowed to return to school. After several weeks of their mother calling every day to ask when the student could return, this student finally decided to take the initiative to enroll in a different school because they were worried about missing more class time.

Many youth who had engaged in poor behavior (skipping class, fighting, drinking, etc.) simultaneously expressed a sense of responsibility for their behaviors while also questioning why school staff did not see this as a cry for help, leading with discipline instead of curiosity. One former SAMi student described it well:

“Because we were in the woods, you know, people could sneak off and smoke weed all of the time. That’s what I was doing. But there was no question of, like, why is, like, a quarter of our student body just stoned all of the time? Like, what the hell is going on with these kids?... And I don’t know if they just don’t have the time and resources or don’t care -- I don’t know.”

|| *Youth crave respect, empathy, and fairness.*

Repeatedly across groups and experiences, youth asked that adults approach them with more open-mindedness, respect,

and empathy. Students voiced a general lack of empathy for many and varied adverse situations. One student, who was homeless during high school, reported that the school administration had told them that they were responsible for telling teachers about their situation:

“A lot of my teachers didn’t even know what was going on, so they didn’t even know why I wasn’t in class. The school expected me to reach out to the teachers and be like, hey, I’m homeless and can’t come to class. And it’s, like, do you know how embarrassing that is for a child?”

Several queer students described the pain of teachers refusing to use their preferred names or pronouns. Others, both queer and straight, felt school staff punished or shamed them when they asked for help around issues of mental health. One reported: “I suffer from, like, mental health issues and... I did open up to one of my counselors. And instead of, like, getting help, they kind of just kicked me out. I wasn’t able to come back to the school. I got unenrolled.”

In most of these cases, the youth did not expect the school to solve challenging situations, but they expressed hurt at the lack of empathy for their experiences. It is unsurprising that given these experiences, the top thing youth said they wanted decision-makers to take away from their experiences was to be more open-minded about what they are experiencing. Youth cannot plan for their futures when they are hurting from broken systems, and schools fail to address this pain with compassion.





Students want to know they can meet their basic needs without fear of losing resources and that school environments will give them the life skills they need to thrive.

Many students reported a lack of access to basic needs at home or in school. At least four students described this need as preventing them from being able to think about the future while in high school. As one student explained:

“I think some people kind of have more of a traditional experience with high school where they go into college and they discover who they are and things like that. But when you spend your entire life focusing on survival -- when you are out of that, how am I supposed to figure out who I am? I haven't been a person for this entire time. I have been on the bottom of the needs trying to manage that. How am I supposed to be deciding what I need to do for my future when I'm so young, and I don't even know how to navigate the trauma that I have accumulated over time?”

Perhaps more striking was the number of students who had clear career goals, even those who many school staff might write off for poor behavior. Students who had been suspended for fighting or chronically absent from school cited dreams of working in business, cosmetology, nursing, music, environmentalism, etc. Our students have plans for their futures; they need the support, encouragement, and appropriate resourcing to pursue those dreams.

Several youth reported confronting onerous, opaque bureaucratic structures when trying to get their needs met in the school environment. A surprising amount directly cited encountering benefits cliffs that either put them back at square one or disincentivized them from applying. This theme

was common for high school students and those navigating complexities with college enrollment and financial aid, particularly when facing unforeseen life events.

The student that experienced homelessness was without transportation for two years during high school, only to learn of the federal McKinney-Vento program as a senior. The program got them transportation, but it took four months after signing up. They reported failing all of their classes during that period and later moved to online schooling to recover the credits.

Similarly, a college student described a particularly frustrating experience trying to make use of a housing voucher:

“I tried to use the CHAP program to apply for housing, and, finally, I got a housing voucher after, like, six months. And, essentially, I had just started a job. So I didn't have, like, any of the documentation or pay stubs or anything like that that they needed to look at. So I was like, okay, let me just have my mom apply with me then, I guess. And they were like, well, no, we only have a voucher for a studio so you would have to wait. So I waited... and they finally got a voucher for a two-bedroom apartment. And I was like, okay, cool. And by that point, me and my mom made too much money. So, yeah. I was fucked. And I had to keep living in a hotel even though I had a fucking housing voucher.”

Another student described difficulty accessing a student emergency fund to cover costs for a car repair that they needed to get to school. A third student explained that they rarely apply for financial resources, partly because the need is so great, and they know they are unlikely to get those resources, but also because the requirements of essays and personal statements on short timelines make it hard to apply for such resources. Challenging restrictions or application requirements make it difficult for students to get the resources they need, even when they qualify for those resources. This disincentivizes some from ever trying.

Relatedly, high school students often wanted basic skills to help meet their needs and prepare them for adulthood via programs like financial management, applied skills and job training, driver's ed, or gender identity-affirming health education. This repeated theme across diverse students and focus groups demonstrated a strong and remarkably pragmatic desire to thrive as adults but a sense that they were not being adequately prepared by what was taught in school.

Recommendations

Education workers need appropriate resources and support.

In order for teachers to show up with compassion and care for students, they need appropriate resourcing. If teachers are overworked and unsupported, most will not be able to show students the care youth crave. We should continually reiterate to teachers the important role they play in influencing students, coaching them to show empathy, and removing stressors that may keep them from showing up compassionately in the classroom. This may include addressing classroom sizes, salary, days off, coaching supports, etc., and prioritizing centering the teacher's voices in this conversation. It also means better and more consistent staffing for advisors, counselors, and school nurses.

The number of students who discussed the value of smaller program environments was noteworthy. Students who had experienced Willie Stewart, iDEA, and Running Start spoke to the power of a smaller environment and how teachers appeared to care more. One student described:

“Something that strikes me as different about the alternative high school rather than the mainstream schools is that the teachers care about you more because they get more of a chance to know you because there is less people who go there. I feel very grateful to have the opportunity to go to the alternative school but I don't like [that I had] to go through all of that to get there.”

The smaller student body certainly removes pressures from teachers and administration, giving them more space to invest in youth. While school funding for roles is central here, local municipalities and philanthropists have the opportunity to fund supporting roles in Expanded Learning and care spaces.

Given the important role of teachers, efforts should ensure they know where to direct students to resources. Multiple youth described frustration at the lack of support they received when they voiced interest in non-college pathways after high school. Even teachers who wanted to be supportive often did not know where to turn. Coaching around pathway options and resources should be part of regular professional development for high school staff. Teachers do not need to be experts on options, but they should be able to talk supportively about options like the trades and workforce and know who to connect students to for more information.

Student resources should be shared in spaces where youth are already present.

Resources should be intentionally shared in places where students already are, like classrooms, sports practices, and clubs, instead of relying on flyers, hosting separate meetings, etc. Students have a lot going on, so sharing resources in spaces where they are already present allows them to focus on what is shared and increases the likelihood of them using that resource. Schools should share using a targeted universalist framework, emphasizing content and resources designed for the particular students in these spaces and explicitly budgeting staff time to reach them. Local governments and agencies should better coordinate resources and communication when bringing youth into required spaces where they serve as a captive audience (such as court-ordered supervision, hospitals, etc.)

This has been a significant learning for our own work at FFTS through our Pierce County Pathways initiative, which looks to improve postsecondary access, persistence, and completion. Two of our strategies, What's Next and Campaign Free Aid, support students in planning their postsecondary pathways and completing the FAFSA. We will prioritize efforts to share resources with students in classrooms and other required spaces to reach them where they're at.

Practices that strip youth of respect and agency must be changed.

Strict rules, differential discipline, and punishment without understanding reasons for behavior are all practices that communicate to youth that they are not worthy of respect. And, to a large degree, such punitive structures make empathetic behavior inherently much less likely. We should look closely at school policies that make youth feel controlled and untrusted and consider how to build an environment that communicates that they are worthy of respect and capable of great futures.

School districts and local governments must move away from relying on policing and police culture in schools. This includes less utilization of Student Resource Officers or uniformed security; and less treating various locations within schools as carceral or privileged environments. We must center student voices in this process of transformation. Creating rules and spaces where students feel trusted, worthy, and capable makes them more likely to believe that about themselves.

This change must extend far beyond the classroom environment. It is here that other agencies such as local government, parks and recreation systems, and expanded learning or after-school program providers have the most opportunity to transform. This means creating shared understanding and policies around discipline, moving towards restorative justice practices, providing wrap-around services, and ensuring information on students in the most need is shared for referral in an effective and timely manner.

Of course, students didn't specifically call out these complex terms. But they certainly addressed the feelings stemming from these concepts when discussing their issues with discipline, access to housing, benefits cliffs, and -crucially- when a caring adult or organization intervened at the right time. Local school districts, governments, and providers should incorporate this during this period of interest in systems transformation, particularly as they direct funding for youth programming and violence reduction. Recent moves towards "Safe Youth" and "Safe Zone" campaigns across different agencies provide

an excellent opportunity for unstructured time with caring adults in non-punitive situations and at times of day that work best for youth.

|| ***Applications for basic needs resources must be simplified, and benefits cliffs should be closely examined.***

Youth repeatedly mentioned being dissuaded from pursuing resources that required challenging application processes. Resources for youth should have a simple or no application process to increase the likelihood of take-up. Each question on an application is an additional hurdle that will dissuade a student from receiving the supports they are eligible for. Additionally, benefits cliffs repeatedly hurt students who qualified for a resource at one point, but then found themselves no longer eligible before being able to take full advantage of the resource, regardless of whether or not they were still in need. Benefit cliffs should be closely examined with the flexibility to receive partial or full benefits when close to the cutoff.





■ Conclusion

While none of the learnings or recommendations emerging from this interview process are new, we were impressed by how widespread sentiments were across demographics, histories, and school contexts. The youth we interviewed were self-reflective, generally understanding of the systems and structures confronting them, and both passionately but pragmatically eager for change. They have faced particularly difficult times driven by the global pandemic, resource scarcity, and the move to online learning. But they were ultimately still young people trying to navigate life and be heard. Student voice is essential and so often overlooked.

The insights and recommendations generated within and across groups elevate the crucial needs for students to see themselves in the systems they inhabit, to be heard by the adults in their lives, to be taken seriously, and to have the resources they need to thrive. At FFTS, we take the insights and recommendations seriously, and we see them aligning with and helping drive the next era of our work. They align with recent advocacy from partner organizations throughout Pierce County that FFTS elevates youth voice over the next decade and that local institutions, providers, and philanthropists commit to providing good earning wages and adequate resourcing to retain staff representing the communities they serve.

Our results are closely aligned with other research and policy suggestions in Washington and beyond. Recent work

by Washington STEM and others has displayed a large gulf when comparing student self-perceptions of their futures with staff perceptions, with students much more likely to see themselves as college-going. Taking cues from Professor John A. Powell's groundbreaking work, numerous Washington and national organizations have suggested moving from means testing to targeted universalist approaches, which ensure that all are guaranteed access to resources, but extra effort goes into providing information and access to those historically denied them. Finally, students are front-and-center in local and national fights to remove police and armed security from schools and to dramatically reform school discipline policies, as evidenced by the Mayor's Youth Commission's recent work to remove Student Resource Officers from Tacoma Public Schools.

The only way to achieve any of this will be through transforming how we resource and staff our systems, the cultures we build up or tear down in learning environments, and the role of students in guiding all of these processes. We encourage our school, municipal, and organizational leaders to take students' experiences and feedback seriously and consider them at the forefront of their decision-making. The insights and perspectives of students should be valued and guide the changes needed to create more positive and empowering learning environments for all.

Appendix A

Foundation for Tacoma Students (FFTS) Student Research Project Focus Groups.

Purpose of this focus group

Understand youth perspectives regarding:

- perceptions on opportunities and barriers to college and careers.
- access to information on programs supporting “postsecondary pathways”
- beliefs about your own futures, your supports, and the efficacy of local systems and programs encouraging postsecondary success.

Introduction

Thank you for coming today to this focus group discussion. I am [name of Facilitator] and I will be your moderator for this session.

And I am [name of Co-Facilitator / Note Taker] and I may ask some questions, keep time, and take notes. We are employees of the Foundation for Tacoma Students, and today we’re here to talk to you about your perceptions of and access to information about support for going into college or a career after high school. The results will help inform a report we are producing soon that we are happy to share back to you.

We will be asking some guided questions and keeping us on time and on track, but this is really your time to share your thoughts and honest opinions. There are no right or wrong answers to our questions. We will cover all the questions in the time we have; at the same time, you each do not have to answer every question. You may also choose to stop participating at any time.

We are recording the session to ensure that we capture what gets said with accuracy. When we write the report based on yours and other people’s input, we will only write about what was said and not who said it. Your responses will be strictly anonymous. That means that we won’t reveal what was said here by individual name, although we will share the information that you give in general. It also means that all of you agree not to share the comments made here with others outside this group.

As you speak, feel free to address each other. Since each of your perspectives is important, we want to be sure to hear from everyone. We are excited to learn from all of you.

Lastly, your participation in this project earns you a \$50 gift card, as we laid out in our email to you, or via the program staff at [program name]. We will provide you a link to the gift card at the end of this focus group.

Has what we described as what will happen during this focus group session been clear to everyone? [Need verbal assent.] Are there questions? If none, is everyone ready to proceed?

Questions

1. To begin, please share your name & pronouns. What is one thing you would like us to know about you?
2. Where are you currently at in your school or career journey (i.e. high school student, apprentice, college student, etc)?
 - Where did you attend high school and how did you feel about your experience with high school education?
3. What are/were your hopes for after high school, like going to college or starting a career? (If there are graduated students, follow-up with “What are your hopes now?”)
 - Can you think of specific people or resources during your high school years that have helped support or held you back with those hopes?
4. What do you know about the programs or resources available to help you with college or career planning? Have you accessed any, or been invited to use them? If so, was anything about your experience particularly helpful or harmful?
5. If you heard about some resources, or started exploring them but didn’t follow through, what was it that caused you to stop? Could something have been offered differently or improved?

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6. Knowing that this information will be shared with decision makers and changemakers throughout Tacoma, what would you like to share with them about ways the system could be improved?
 7. (Optional) Here is a list of resources we believe are available to students in your school. Which ones have you heard of before? What do you know about them? Have you accessed any, or been invited to use them? If so, was anything about your experience particularly helpful or harmful?
 8. (Optional) You participated in our [Campaign Free Aid / What's Next] program earlier this year, but didn't complete. What was that like? What caused you to stop? And most important, what could we have done differently to help you finish?

Appreciation and Closing

We thank you very much for your participation! What you have shared with us helps identify areas for improving support for young people of various backgrounds as they navigate the complexities of leaving K-12 school and transitioning into the next state of their life.

As a reminder of a few things we mentioned before we began the session:

- Out of respect for one another, we ask that what was said in our session not be shared with others outside of this group. However, it is okay to share with anyone the questions we asked. We sent you a copy of the questions
- To maintain confidentiality, what you shared will be combined with responses of participants from other focus group sessions or interviews.
- The report will include synthesis of the perspectives we heard, including your important contribution.
- If you have any questions that come up later, please do not hesitate to contact us. Our contact information is on our consent forms, and available via your program staff.

Appendix B

Below is a list of the questions asked during focus groups and interviews with simple counts by response.

1. How did you feel about your experience with high school education?

| Response | Number of Respondents |
|--|-----------------------|
| Generally negative | 14 |
| Generally positive | 8 |
| Lack of support from teachers & administration | 5 |
| Positive experience in alternative programs | 4 |

2. Were there specific people or resources during your high school years that have helped support or hindered you from your hopes for life after high school?

| Category | Response | Number of Respondents |
|-----------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Supported | Teachers | 12 |
| Supported | School Staff | 5 |
| Supported | Family | 3 |
| Supported | Therapist | 1 |
| Supported | Librarian | 1 |
| Supported | CBO's | 5 |
| Supported | School Clubs | 4 |
| Supported | Substance Abuse Rehab | 1 |
| Hindered | Teachers | 9 |
| Hindered | School Admin | 4 |
| Hindered | Family | 4 |
| Hindered | General financial challenges | 3 |
| Hindered | Emphasis on college over career | 2 |

3. What do you know about the programs or resources available to help you with college or career planning? Have you accessed any, or been invited to use them? If so, was anything about your experience particularly helpful or harmful?

Programs/Resources:

| Response | Number of Respondents |
|---|-----------------------|
| Advising Bloc (as a required class in school) | 8 |
| Our Sister's House | 5 |
| Northwest Education Access | 5 |
| Oasis Youth Center | 3 |
| Fresh Start | 2 |
| Willie Stewart | 2 |
| Scholarships (generally) | 2 |
| Financial Aid Workshops | 2 |
| Tutoring | 2 |
| Running Start | 2 |
| WIOA | 1 |
| Library Resources | 1 |
| Career specific clubs | 1 |
| What's Next | 1 |
| GED | 1 |
| Peace Community Center | 1 |
| MESA | 1 |
| TRiO | 1 |
| Workforce Resources | 1 |

Appendix B | Continued

How directed to resources:

| Response | Number of Respondents |
|---|-----------------------|
| In class or other required time | 9 |
| Court ordered | 7 |
| Heard about from someone in advising capacity (CBO, school counselors, etc) | 6 |
| Internet | 4 |
| Friends/Family | 4 |
| Flyers | 2 |

4. If you heard about some resources, or started exploring them but didn't follow through, what was it that caused you to stop? Could something have been offered differently or improved?

| Response | Number of Respondents |
|--|-----------------------|
| Benefits offered in too cumbersome of a way or hit a benefits cliff | 5 |
| Lack of support/wrong fit | 4 |
| Uninterested | 4 |
| Interested but challenges with format (location, canceled, offered too late, etc) | 3 |
| Wish more emphasis on technical schools and opportunities for students interested in the trades | 2 |
| Lack of suitable mental health or substance abuse resources/stigma about accessing those resources | 2 |
| Financial challenges | 2 |

5. Knowing that this information will be shared with decision makers and changemakers throughout Tacoma, what would you like to share with them about ways the system could be improved?

| Category | Category | Number of Respondents |
|--------------------|---|-----------------------|
| Mindset | Open mindedness about students & what they are struggling with | 6 |
| Care in Curriculum | More exposure to trades/careers | 5 |
| Care in Curriculum | Flexibility in school structure (allowing for complicated family situations and adjusting structure to better meet student needs) | 5 |
| Care in Curriculum | Practical classes | 4 |
| Care in Curriculum | Healthcare classes reflecting queer students | 2 |
| Resourcing | Get rid of bad/racist teachers | 2 |
| Resourcing | Pay teachers more | 2 |
| Resourcing | Change the conversation about supports for students regarding FRL, rehab, mental health, etc | 5 |
| Resourcing | Resources for BIPOC/Queer youth | 1 |



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