

### **Back on Track in K-12 Learning**

It is widely known that the COVID-19 pandemic created a major learning disruption for students across K-12 schools. According to the [Education Recovery Scorecard](#), students from across Washington State performed just above the national average in both reading and math. However, when taking a closer look at the individual school districts across Washington the disparities are far more apparent. The Yakima School District saw student performance decline the most compared to other districts which can be connected to the high poverty rates. Low-income students, who have already struggled before the pandemic, fell the most behind in academics post-COVID. As we move forward to get students back on track, we must prioritize a solution that supports those who have fallen the most behind. The most effective approach to assist student learning is through individual tutoring. After discussing with other students about the logistics of tutoring (Class Discussion, April 26), there are 3 crucial benefits to investing in this approach: 1) tutoring provides specific academic support for students, 2) values of relationships and community are simultaneously being created, and 3) tutoring is the most feasible approach to get students who are the most behind on track.

With an individualized tutoring system, students who are struggling with specific concepts or subjects can receive one-to-one support and assistance. A tutor can identify the specific areas where a student is struggling and provide instruction to help them overcome those challenges. This allotted time gives students the opportunity to focus on the topics that need the most attention, closing the individual learning gaps. By dedicating specialized explanations for students who are behind, they can work towards catching up and fully understanding the material at a pace that is most valuable to them. When students feel in control of their learning, they are more likely to be engaged and feel confident about their abilities. [Research from San Bernardino](#) highlights that with available tutoring services students improve within their academics. Further, students who utilize tutoring have higher retention rates compared to those who do not have tutoring available. This finding is incredibly important for students in their final years of high school who may have fallen behind due to the pandemic. Tutoring serves as the changing point in which students have the opportunity to continue, give meaning to, and complete their education successfully.

Although the pandemic stifled academic learning, it also disrupted the development of children. [Data from WSA](#) shows that preschool aged kids were behind in social-emotional skills which has led to "behavior issues that require individual attention." Tutoring can provide balanced relationships that allow children in elementary school to continue building on critical social-emotional skills in a thorough manner. Additionally, with a one-on-one tutoring system students can build bridges of community between families, schools, and other community members. In order to provide successful academic support, tutors must be in constant communication with teachers in order to evaluate the learning and growth of their students. This connection will allow the tutor to provide insightful assistance for the student as well as serve as a point of contact for families to keep track of their child's progress. Overtime, the student and tutor will be able to develop a long-term relationship that can provide the student with a mentor and a friend. The role of tutoring in a student's life can not only serve as an academic guide, but also as a companion to support other parts of their personal development.

There have been numerous solutions proposed to bridge the learning gap like expanding mental health services in schools or increasing the number of days in a school year but tutoring is the most feasible option in getting kids back on track. The goal of the project is to assist students who have experienced the most learning loss throughout the pandemic. Various

reports from [Stanford](#) and [Nation's Report Card](#) consistently present that low-income students have disproportionately been impacted by the pandemic. This impact can be attributed to a multitude of factors but some primary examples include limited access to technology and internet, varying home life that was not adequate to support remote learning (limited space, family responsibilities, access to basic needs, etc.), and insufficient support systems outside of school. Likewise, many parents from WSA's Parent Ambassador Program expressed the concern that "family experience looked different," acknowledging that access to work, support system, and cultural communities allowed some families to thrive over others. However, tutoring addresses these issues. As mentioned, tutoring offers academic support in learning styles that best serve the student which can offer a variety of resources. Similarly, tutoring is an important support system that can support the student personally and academically. Even in a situation where the tutor may not have the exact capacity to aid the student, tutoring can be another outlet where students can communicate their needs and the program can find those additional resources to the student and family. The ability to provide long-term support to students and families is only possible through a tutoring program that aims to assist those most in need.

Tutoring is not a new idea to many communities. In the city of Shoreline, Washington, [Canopy Scholars](#) has provided tutoring services to low-income students since 2007. Canopy serves about 60 elementary students and 30 students across the Shoreline School District who are considered low-income. After each school day, students meet with volunteers for about two hours to complete homework and the provided math and vocabulary curriculum. Not only are students able to receive the academic support needed to bounce back from the pandemic but they are also building a community. Canopy works communicates with the schools' educators and family advocates to create the academic and socio-emotional curriculum. Though there is no publicly available data on the academic progress of Canopy students, it is apparent that the tutoring program serves as a center to empower students in their learning and in their communities.

While tutoring is the most feasible approach, there are still important questions that have been brought up by other students like: What qualifies a student for tutoring? Will it be an equal and fair opportunity? Who will provide tutoring services, and are they qualified? Perhaps the most anticipated question is the concern over costs. To fund this program, costs include payments for a large gathering space (if outside of school grounds), wages for full-time positions such as a Site Coordinator, and purchasing materials for students (books, laptops, supplies, etc) and a few others. The cost may seem grand but the impact of the program is immediate and long-term. Students benefit from these services by continuously improving academically and developing other social skills. Additionally, finding qualified tutors can also be a challenge. While some districts may have access to volunteers from experienced backgrounds, others may have to rely on the support of community members while the program becomes more established. However, the impact that individual tutoring has on improving the learning of students outweighs the costs and potential downsides of the program. While the specific implementations of the tutoring program may vary slightly by school district, implementing a tutoring program similar to the work of Canopy Scholars is an imperative first step.

As students return to school during the post-COVID era, it is crucial that the state works towards supporting them both academically and socially. Tutoring is the best option to get students in public schools back on track. From designated academic assistance, to community building, and practicality of implementing this program proves that a tutoring program will be the most effective solution. Research shows that low-income students have been at the center of learning loss but local organizations prove that tutoring programs accomplish the goals that the state aims to achieve. In order to continue supporting the success of Washington State students, OSPI must greatly invest in the tutoring program to get kids back on track.

## Protecting SNAP Benefits

As the United States begins recovering from the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Congressional members have proposed numerous pieces of legislation centered around navigating the financial budget. Specifically, legislators have focused their attention towards avoiding reaching the debt ceiling. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) has been a prominent player in proposing a packet of bills that aim to address this financial dilemma. However, these bills would increase the requirements for people who receive SNAP benefits making it more difficult to afford food costs. Here at the Food Research Action Center (FRAC), we are driven by the mission to improve the health and well-being of those most impacted by poverty-related hunger. The current focus of the legislation would oppose our mission and negatively impact millions of families. In order to mitigate the implementation of these bills, it is vital to analyze the legislation and take action in a manner that best aligns with our goals.

The eligibility of receiving SNAP benefits has significantly shifted throughout the pandemic. Before the rise of COVID-19, SNAP eligibility was focused on the ability to meet certain work requirements and a person's (or household's) income. In order to apply and maintain benefits, an individual must have work that provides them with at least 20 hours each week. Additionally, SNAP was only available to people whose income fell at or below the federal poverty level. Though the income determined eligibility, it also determined the allotted amount of SNAP that a person would receive that was proportional to their income. However, during the pandemic these requirements were shifted to make food access more affordable. Claire Lane from the Anti-Hunger & Nutritional Coalition illustrated how SNAP requirements changed in four major ways to accommodate the public health emergency. First, those already enrolled for assistance no longer received an amount proportional to their aid but rather gained the maximum amount that any person can qualify for. Secondly, the work requirements for both Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs) and certain College Students were terminated which alleviated strict requirements to apply for aid. Thirdly, the nation expanded SNAP funds to be used for online grocery shopping services. Finally, the federal government distributed extra funds to assist states in covering administrative costs. Throughout the pandemic, the federal government expanded access to these services to assist people during a global health emergency. This expansion left a heavy financial burden on states across the nation. Since the ending of the emergency, eligibility to receive SNAP is changing once again.

In April of 2023, Speaker of the House McCarthy began outlining the specific ways that SNAP requirements would be tightened. In these restrictions, the bill has already targeted ABAWDs from ages 18-49 who do not have children or exemptions to only receive up to three months of SNAP benefits if they are unable to meet the 20-hour work week requirement. If this work requirement is not met, they may be suspended from receiving assistance for an additional three years. McCarthy's legislation aims to expand these work requirements to people within the ages of 50-55 years old. The [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#) notes that roughly 1 million individuals fall within these age and work criteria. Additionally, they argue that efforts to tighten SNAP eligibility through stricter work requirements is centered around the narrative that those who are in need of this assistance are not actively working enough to fulfill their needs. Aside from this false assumption, there are many ways that this bill has its shortcomings. Millions of people who currently receive aid would be excluded due to not working enough hours or having any work at all with these new laws. This would particularly single out those who are older because of age-based discrimination that limits one's ability to be employed due to physical ability. Similarly, those who are unable to receive exemptions but still have mental or family responsibility would no longer be supported. McCarthy's efforts would "eliminate a state's ability to respond to individuals' specific needs, or to unique labor market challenges," thus discriminating against certain groups of people from meeting their basic needs. Though these efforts are with the intention of lowering the amount that the government spends and incentivizing people to work, [research](#) has shown that removing SNAP does not increase

employment. Even if this bill successfully lowered government costs, it does not outweigh the negative effects that it has on millions of families who rely on this assistance to sustain their life.

As the FRAC, we must take action to assure that people are able to have nutritious meals available to them by preventing the passage of this bill. Recently, there have been motions to incorporate McCarthy's SNAP restrictions as part of the larger Farm Bill. The [Farm Bill](#) is reviewed every 5 years to allow policymakers to address any agricultural and food programs which are oversought by the Agricultural Committee in the Senate. This information allows our organization to contact the specific members who have the power to support or oppose the SNAP requirements. Ranking member of the Agriculture Committee, John Boozman (R-AR), has expressed some support for McCarthy's efforts, but with outreach from community members he may be able to readjust his stance.

In order to effectively communicate with Boozman, it is imperative that we find constituents within Arkansas that are being heavily affected by the new SNAP eligibility standards. In [Arkansas](#), nearly 9% of the state's population used SNAP in 2022. Of the 281,000 people who use SNAP, 41% are with older family members or support someone with a disability. Between the years of 2014 through 2018 "SNAP lifted 79,000 people above the poverty line in Arkansas," demonstrating that this assistance had positive long-term implications for individuals and the state. With this information, it is highly probable that older folks who live in Arkansas are facing the consequences of new SNAP requirements and are willing to share their experience. One way to catch his attention is by asking those who receive SNAP benefits in Arkansas to share how these new restrictions would limit their access to food and further weaken the quality of their health. By centering this message to Boozman with an authentic experience and story from one of his constituents, he would be more willing to adjust his position to suit the needs of the people he serves. Furthermore, by presenting statistical evidence that SNAP benefits eventually lead people out of poverty it would address the concern that SNAP has become the [sole income, rather than a supplemental cost, that covers grocery costs](#). This is a crucial point to include because it is directly related to the State he is expected to support. Furthermore, in crafting genuine stories about people's lived experiences, we will likely be able to identify a core problem between all of them. Using this pattern, FRAC can propose the specific action we would want Boozman to take. Our proposed solution to Boozman is to strike down the SNAP provision of the Farm Bill because it would benefit the quality of life for many of his constituents. Additionally, the state of Arkansas would see long-term impacts relating to the economy and labor force because as people have their needs met, they will be better able to contribute to the workforce. The pandemic reinforced many systemic barriers that have reset the economic progress of many disadvantaged groups. As the national economy begins its recovery process, it cannot be overlooked that the families most affected still need assistance during this post-covid era. Though it will definitely take considerable time and effort to persuade Speaker Boozman, it is always worth trying if it means that the voices of those most vulnerable can be heard.

The Food Research Action Center has always been at the forefront of providing information and resources that aim to make nutritional meals accessible to all. As everyone attempts to recover from the pandemic, it is incredibly important to support legislation that addresses barriers that prevent the most vulnerable communities from having their basic needs met. With communal effort, FRAC can empower SNAP beneficiaries to advocate and protect SNAP benefits that have been a form of sustenance throughout the global health emergency.



## **The Cost of Higher Education**

While the COVID pandemic shifted the course of learning for students across public K-12 grade schools, it also significantly brought to the table a conversation about student loans. For 3 years now repayments of student loans have been on a pause but in less than a few months, those repayments are expected to begin once again. However, recent efforts by the Biden Administrations aimed to accommodate for these upcoming changes and allow for economic recovery from the pandemic. The [Three-Part Forgiveness](#) plan is aimed at supporting working class and low-to-middle income individuals. The amount that an individual would receive would be dependent on if one's individual income is below \$125,000 and if one is a recipient of the Pell-Grant (\$20,000 for Pell-Grant recipients and \$10,000 for non-recipients). However, multiple Republican states brought a [lawsuit](#) against the President's efforts arguing that it would be an overreach of executive authority. Many speculate that the Supreme Court will likely rule against President Biden because of the conservative political nature of the court. Regardless of the decision, it is imperative that the Biden administration upholds its commitment to [provide student debt relief](#) in one way or another. Assuming that the Supreme Court limits the implementation of this executive action, it is unlikely that we can rely on the legislature to tackle student debt due to the polarization within Congress. Moreover, we can explore alternative avenues such as increasing funding for basic needs programs at all two- and four-year universities. This alternative is modeled after Washington State's current pilot approach and also considers the impact of recent administrative actions on the landscape of student loans.

[Research](#) conducted by WSAC and Western Washington University shed light on the prevalence of housing and food insecurity among college students in Washington. As a response, Washington State implemented the Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness (SSEH) program beginning in 2019 that has been a vital initiative in helping students overcome housing insecurity and other barriers that can disrupt their educational success. The Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) initially administered six public institutions and has now reached over 25 institutions in 2022. As part of the SSEH pilot project, [UW Tacoma](#) received a significant grant of \$100,000 to provide support to students who have experienced homelessness. The funds also support the creation of HuskiesCare which is an online resource offering over 100 resources tailored to students' specific concerns about their needs like food options, emergency aid, and federal benefits. Additionally, an intern has been hired to actively encourage students to sign up for SNAP benefits and provide prepaid cash cards for those facing immediate food needs. Since the beginning of the SSEH pilot project, more than 2,650 students across the state have been supported throughout the program. [Senate Bill 5702](#) (expanded SSEH pilot program) was passed in the Washington State legislature during the 2023 session. Following this similar program, the Biden Administration can work towards making higher education more affordable and accessible by supporting the basic needs of students that would allow them to thrive. This effort signifies our collective commitment to providing long-term support for students facing housing insecurity and ensuring their educational success.

It is crucial for the government to fund and sustain a comprehensive basic needs program to ensure that students can thrive in their studies. Throughout history, the nation has upheld education as a fundamental right and no student should have to face the overwhelming burden of unmet basic needs while striving to meet academic and personal responsibilities. By addressing crucial problems related to financial hardships, this program has been proven to support the success of its beneficiaries. When students have their basic needs met, they can fully immerse themselves in their studies, actively participate in classroom discussions, and engage in enriching extracurricular activities that contribute to their personal and intellectual growth. Furthermore, investing in a comprehensive basic needs program demonstrates a commitment to equity and social justice. It provides critical support to marginalized students who are disproportionately impacted by these challenges, ensuring that no student is left behind due

to circumstances beyond their control. By creating an inclusive and supportive environment, the government plays a pivotal role in fostering academic success, empowering future leaders, and nurturing a more equitable society. When students can focus on their education without the constant worry of where their next meal will come from or whether they will have a safe place to sleep, they are given the opportunity to reach their full potential and contribute meaningfully to their communities. In focusing efforts on this program, the Biden Administration government lays the foundation for a sustainable future for the individuals themselves and for society as a whole.

Considering the major cultural debates that student loan forgiveness has brought, it may no longer be the most feasible option. The cultural debate surrounding student loans raises important questions about our values and priorities as a society. The soaring costs of education and the burden of student loan debt have sparked conversations about the true purpose and accessibility of higher education. This conversation has led to varying perspectives about the right to an education and has yet to lead to a national protection, further complicating the student loan debate. Similarly, student loan forgiveness may make us question our approach to other types of loans which may lead to a reconsideration of the entire lending system. If we only focus on student loans, we might overlook the larger problem of debt in our society. Mortgages, small business loans, and other forms of debt were also put on hold during the pandemic, and we need to address them collectively to ensure financial stability and social equity. By shifting our focus away from student loans, we can redirect our efforts towards tackling the underlying issues. We must address the high cost of attending universities and explore alternative approaches to funding education. This could be through the basic needs pilot program and later initiatives such as reducing tuition fees and expanding scholarship and grant programs. In order to fully tackle student loans, we need to have a more comprehensive discussion about our lending practices and rethink how we value education in our society. By exploring alternative options the administration can pave the way for a future where students can thrive academically without being burdened with overwhelming financial obligations.

Implementing this basic needs program at universities brings along certain challenges that need to be taken into account. It's crucial to ensure there are enough financial resources to effectively support students in need and provide ongoing assistance. Additionally, the operational aspects of the program, such as management, require careful full-time support and commitment. Partnerships with organizations must be reestablished in order to deliver efficient assistance to students. Another challenge is related to connecting with students who are facing basic needs insecurity which means a supportive environment where students feel comfortable and empowered to access help is essential. Students from various backgrounds and circumstances may have unique challenges related to other parts of their identity. Ensuring inclusivity and understanding these needs requires a flexible program design. Collaborating with student organizations, faculty, and staff can play a significant role in spreading awareness and connecting students with the program. Collaborating with student organizations and staff can play a significant role in spreading awareness and connecting students with the program.

The COVID pandemic has not only disrupted education but also brought discussions around student loans. As we approach the end of pause-loan payments, the Biden Administration has made efforts to support economic recovery and address student debt. Despite these challenges, it is crucial for the administration to uphold its commitment to providing student debt relief in some form. By focusing on comprehensive solutions like funding basic needs programs and reevaluating the cost of education, we can ensure that students can thrive academically without being burdened by financial hardships. Implementing such programs at universities, however, poses challenges that require careful consideration, such as securing adequate financial resources, maintaining operational efficiency, and fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for students. By addressing these challenges and prioritizing the well-being and success of students, we can pave the way for a brighter future where education is accessible and affordable for all.

## **Accessing Childcare**

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need to make quality child care more accessible and mitigate the negative effects of that disrupted early childhood development. The importance of investing in high-quality preschool programs cannot be overstated as the development of early learning has decreased significantly and the government must make efforts to support them. As the Biden Administration aims to run a political campaign on supporting access to childcare, the most feasible commitment can be made to expand the Early Start Act (ESA) across multiple states. ESA aims to make preschool universally accessible while still prioritizing school readiness. In order to assure a successful program, it is important to consider how teachers will be considered, the size of classrooms, and what curriculum will be available to child care providers.

In 2015, Washington State enacted The Early Start Act which has created a quality early childhood education accessible to all children. Its underlying goal is to ensure that every child enters school ready to learn, break the cycle of poverty for families, and allow communities to invest in long-term benefits of early learning. The Early Start Act is managed by the Department of Children, Youth, and Families which has continuously made improvements to the program, driving forward new initiatives and fostering positive changes. Additionally, the act mandates the standards within the early learning system which has ensured a unified set of regulations that are followed by all providers. This simplifies universal standards and promotes consistency in the quality of early childhood education across the state. Specifically, the ESA implemented a program called Early Achievers that has played a crucial role in enhancing the quality of child care and early learning. The Early Start Act also brought the extension of subsidy eligibility to 12 months for families receiving state-subsidized from Working Connections Child Care. This change provides stability for both families and child care providers, as it allows providers to anticipate the number of children they will serve over a longer period and offers families a more consistent and predictable source of support.

Recognizing the significance of cultural competence in early learning, the Early Start Act emphasizes the establishment of guidelines for culturally responsive training for early learning professionals. These guidelines provide a framework for professionals to incorporate diverse perspectives and meet the unique needs of children from various backgrounds. Furthermore, the act emphasizes the importance of racial equity and diversity within early learning programs. It mandates strong support for diverse providers and families, aiming to eliminate disparities in child outcomes. The Department of Children, Youth, and Families has developed a comprehensive strategy to advance racial equity and ensure that all children, regardless of their racial or ethnic background, have equal opportunities to succeed. Under ESA maintains the use of robust data and evidence-based practices to inform policy decisions and program funding. By grounding initiatives in research and analysis, the act aims to continuously improve the experiences and outcomes of providers, children, and families.

The success of Washington State's Early Start Act is one that can be modeled to implement at the federal level. The Early Start Act is an incredible initiative that goes beyond just expanding preschool access but also presents equal opportunity and prepares children for school in the best possible way. One of the most significant impacts of the Early Start Act is its commitment to making early learning accessible. By providing free or low-cost preschool to families who may not have been able to afford it otherwise, the act ensures that children from all socioeconomic backgrounds have an equal chance to thrive. This approach creates a fairer society where children's success isn't determined by their family's financial circumstances. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds gain access to high-quality preschool programs that set them up for success academically and socially. These programs offer a structured learning environment where children learn crucial skills like problem-solving, creativity, and communication. By engaging in activities that promote literacy and numeracy, children develop a strong foundation that will support their learning journey for years to come.

The Early Start Act also recognizes the vital role of qualified teachers in delivering quality early education. By requiring preschool teachers to hold AA degrees in early childhood education or related fields, the act ensures that children are guided by knowledgeable and skilled educators. This commitment to teacher qualifications enhances the learning experience for children, as qualified teachers can provide individualized attention and create engaging lessons dedicated to each child's needs. By limiting the teacher to student ratio to 1:10, each child will receive the attention they deserve from their teachers. By limiting class sizes and ensuring manageable ratios, preschool teachers can focus on building meaningful relationships and providing personalized support. This approach greatly enhances children's learning experiences and contributes to their overall readiness for school. A great importance on a comprehensive curriculum that covers all aspects of child development will also be provided through this program, developing a range of cognitive and social-emotional skills. Preschool programs under the act provide opportunities for children to explore their interests, develop their curiosity, and engage in hands-on activities that spark their imaginations. By nurturing children's holistic development, the Early Start Act sets them up for success not only academically but also in terms of their overall well-being. Due to these many benefits, this is the best policy option for President Biden to run his campaign on.

In conclusion, the Early Start Act presents a crucial solution to the pressing issue of accessible and high-quality childcare, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The harmful effects of disrupted early childhood development requires immediate action, and such investing in preschool programs. The Biden Administration's commitment to promoting access to childcare aligns perfectly with the expansion of the Early Start Act (ESA) across multiple states. The ESA holds incredible value as it not only addresses the need for universal preschool access but also prioritizes school readiness. Its implementation would have great implications for equal opportunity and preparing children for their educational journey. Drawing inspiration from Washington State's successful enactment of the Early Start Act in 2015, the federal government can leverage this model to establish a nationwide approach.

The success of Washington State's implementation of the Early Start Act demonstrates its high potential as a federal policy. By expanding the act nationwide, President Biden's campaign can effectively address the critical need for accessible early childhood education and promote equal opportunity. This expansion would have a transformative impact on children's lives, preparing them academically, socially, and emotionally for their educational journey. The Early Start Act is a comprehensive and pragmatic solution to the pressing challenges faced in early childhood education. By leveraging the success of Washington State's implementation and emphasizing equal opportunity and school readiness, the act holds immense potential to shape the future of early education in the United States.