ISSUE BRIEF

SDMC

MAKING POLICY PERSONAL



Who Decides—and Why It Matters

Youth Development Fund: Youth Deserve More Than Scattered Dollars

Making Youth Development Visible, Funded, and Fair

When Funding Is Invisible, Cuts Are Easy—and Youth Pay the Price

Washington's youth development sector has been operating without a clear, coherent funding infrastructure—despite being asked to respond to increasingly complex needs among young people.

As the Youth Development Strategy Table (YDST) has documented, public funding for youth development in Washington **is low and allocated in an uneven way**, leaving inequitable access to positive youth development, particularly outside of major urban areas and for BIPOC and low-income youth. The result is not just gaps in programming, but a sector that **"lacks strong infrastructure and adequate sustainability."**



Compounding this problem, **state investments in youth development are scattered across multiple agencies in the state budget**, making it difficult for legislators—and the public—to see where investments are made, where they are cut, and how they align with stated goals. In the most recent legislative session, this fragmentation contributed to **large cuts to youth development investments**, often without clear visibility or accountability.

The proposed **Washington State Youth Development Fund** is an attempt to address this structural problem first.

TThe Fund creates a **central container for future investments in positive youth development**, designed to:

- Increase **fiscal transparency and visibility**
- Establish a **formal state intention** to invest in youth development for the first time
- Position youth development to receive **future public dollars** when fiscal conditions improve

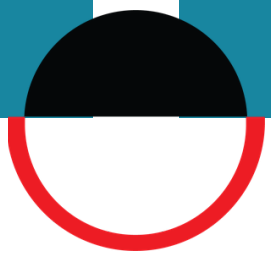
Key features of the proposal include:

Housing the Fund in **OSPI**, so youth development investments are centrally placed

Designating a **fiscal agent** to **subgrant funding** using an **equity lens**

Structuring the Fund as **public/private**, with philanthropic challenge matches to future public funding

Prioritizing programs serving youth ages **5 to 24**



This is not framed as a one-time funding fix. It is infrastructure—designed to make youth development visible, legible, and fundable over time.



What Youth Need to Thrive—and Who Is Most Often Denied It

Those Asked to Carry the Most, With the Least Support

The Youth Development Fund is explicitly oriented toward young people who have historically had the least access to opportunity—and the most exposure to instability, trauma, and structural inequity.

Statute language prioritizes funding for programs serving youth who:

- Live in **geographies with the least access** to youth development opportunities
- Have **historically not met academic standards**
- Are at **higher risk of dropout or lower-than-average graduation rates**
- Are **in foster care or experiencing homelessness**
- Are **living in poverty**
- Are **Native youth**

Eligible programming includes:

- Learning acceleration
- Social-emotional learning
- Mentorship
- Connection to non-school-based resources
- Post-secondary access and career pathways
- Arts, sports, STEM, and outdoor education
- Youth civic engagement and cultural programming

From a **Youth Thrive™** perspective, these investments align with what research tells us about healthy adolescent development. Adolescence is a period of rapid change, where young people are actively working to:



When youth have experienced **violence, maltreatment, system involvement, or chronic instability**, those developmental tasks become harder—not because youth are failing, but because their environments are failing them. Youth Thrive emphasizes that **supportive relationships with competent and caring adults**, opportunities to build skills, and environments that reduce toxic stress are essential to healthy transitions into adulthood.

In short: **Who benefits most are the young people most often expected to adapt to broken systems without adequate support.**

Who Decides—and How

Centralization Creates Opportunity—for Equity and Accountability

This policy is not just about where money goes. It is about who has the authority to decide, and whose knowledge shapes those decisions.

Under the proposed structure:

The state establishes the Fund within **OSPI**

OSPI selects a fiscal agent

The fiscal agent awards **subgrants** using an **equity lens**

Funding priorities are guided by statutory criteria

Centralization brings real benefits. A single funding container increases visibility and makes youth development investments harder to ignore or quietly cut. But centralization also concentrates power.

In addition to getting this fund established, it will be critical that advocates continue to push to ensure that this structure will meaningfully incorporate:

Youth Themselves

Community-based providers

Communities most impacted by inequitable access



This brings a significant opportunity: to intentionally embed youth voice, community voice, and equity into how the fund is implemented from the outset.

Youth Thrive is explicit: **young people are experts in their own development**. Relationships, voice, and agency are not add-ons; they are foundational. When systems are designed without lived experience informing decisions, they tend to rely on abstract data, administrative convenience, and compliance logic—often producing barriers that undermine participation and trust.

The opportunity here is to ensure that "equity lens" is not just a grant criterion, but a **decision-making practice**—one that reflects real conditions on the ground and shifts power toward those closest to the work.

Why It Matters Now

Infrastructure Today, Better Outcomes for Youth Tomorrow

The Youth Development Fund is intentionally forward-looking.

The current fiscal environment limits new spending, but the proposal recognizes a likely influx of future resources, including:

Federal social media lawsuit dollars, tied to the urgent youth mental health crisis

Other potential **dedicated revenue streams**, such as vape taxes

Youth development programs are positioned as prevention infrastructure—providing healthy alternatives to isolation, excessive screen time, and environments that exacerbate stress and disconnection.



From a developmental standpoint, timing matters. Youth Thrive underscores that adolescence and emerging adulthood are critical periods for brain development. Exposure to toxic stress and trauma during this time can affect learning, emotional regulation, and long-term outcomes. Conversely, consistent, supportive environments can build protective and promotive factors that last a lifetime.

Creating the infrastructure now increases the likelihood that future funding is directed intentionally, rather than scattered reactively.

What We're Hearing on the Ground

The Gaps Are Consistent—and Addressable

Several patterns emerge consistently when listening to youth, providers, and communities:

Access is uneven by design.
Geography, race, and income shape whether youth can access consistent developmental supports.

Systems often prioritize control over connection.
Youth impacted by trauma are frequently treated as behavior problems rather than young people responding to what has happened to them.

Providers are stretched thin.
Programs are expected to deliver outcomes without stable funding or infrastructure, leading to burnout and fragmentation.

Equity language doesn't always translate into equity outcomes.
Without intentional power-sharing, well-meaning policies can reproduce the very inequities they aim to address.

Youth Thrive reminds us that trust, safety, and relationships are prerequisites for engagement. When young people feel unseen or unheard, disengagement becomes a rational form of self-protection.

What Has to Change

Structure Matters—but Power and Practice Matter More

The Youth Development Fund is a necessary step—but structure alone will not guarantee impact.

Several shifts are essential:

From fragmentation to visibility.
A central container makes youth development legible in the budget and in public discourse.

From equal distribution to real equity.
Prioritization must reflect lived conditions, not just data abstractions.

From serving youth to sharing power with youth.
Decision-making processes must include meaningful youth and community voice—not symbolic participation.

From crisis response to prevention.
Youth development should be treated as core infrastructure, not discretionary programming.

From deficit framing to strength-based practice.
Youth Thrive is clear: focusing on assets, relationships, and resilience leads to better outcomes than punitive or compliance-driven approaches.

From isolated programs to a youth development ecosystem.
The Youth Development Fund is a necessary step toward investing in the diverse providers who together form a complex ecosystem of supports for youth.

Ultimately, the question is not whether Washington should invest in youth development. It is **who gets to shape that investment**, and whether the system is designed to trust the people it claims to serve.

That's why who decides—and how—matters.