Indicator News:

State of Washington Education Research & Data Center (ERDC) Innovates New Education Indicators

The Education Research and Data Center (ERDC) "assembles data and conducts analyses of early learning, K-12, and higher education programs and education issues across the P-20 spectrum." Completely new data are now available from the ERDC, called "P20W" data, which is designed to collect information pertaining to postsecondary enrollment of students in their first year after graduating from a high school in Washington State, and whether these post-secondary enrollments took place in state or out of state. The High School Feedback Reports offer this new data on the state, school district, and high school level. This has allowed for the creation of a new indicator on the Spokane Community Indicators site titled First Year Post High School Higher Education Attendance Rates.

Click here for more information and to access the High School Feedback Reports.

Eastern Washington University releases report titled “Stabilizing Homelessness to Address Education Outcomes: Strategies to Increase Graduation Rate in Spokane Public Schools”

Data on homeless students from the Department of Education suggest Spokane County’s rate of homelessness is very high - 33% higher than the state average and as much as 46% higher in some communities. The report was recently released at a Priority Spokane forum on Student Homelessness in November. Of the nearly 3,000 homeless children in Spokane County schools, 76% are doubling - up with family and friends due to eviction or other financial issues - a situation that is the most common precursor to entering a homeless shelter, and a household structure associated with stress and anxiety; social, emotional and behavioral difficulties; and poor academic performance. It is important to note there are two very different measures of youth homelessness – each provided on the Spokane Community Indicators website - one sourced by the U.S. Housing and Urban Development and another sourced by the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

To view the “Stabilizing Homelessness to Address Education Outcomes” report in its entirety, click here. To view the companion short film titled “Erase Student Homelessness”, click here.
Spokane Regional Health District releases report “Missing the Foundation: Understanding Homelessness in Spokane County”

Addressing homelessness in Spokane County is a priority for many local agencies and non-profit organizations. Homelessness is a complex issue—rooted in social inequities, such as poverty, lack of affordable housing and low-level education. Many organizations support the homeless by providing housing and other social services as well as assisting families and individuals experiencing poverty in an effort to prevent homelessness. The purpose of this report, released at a Priority Spokane forum on Student Homelessness in November, is to describe the homeless population in Spokane County and bring clarity to the complex web of services that are provided locally, as well as identify unmet needs of the homeless population in an effort to direct future prevention and intervention services. To view the report in its entirety, click here.

Featured Indicators:

Number of Uninsured in County Drops Dramatically by Matt Lower and Dr. Patrick Jones

This past year (2014) was year of great change in the American health care system: it was the first full year of the nation’s health care system under the statutes of The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (the ACA). While the ACA enacts changes in many parts of the health care delivery, this article focuses on the effects the new law has had on the share of Spokane County population without health insurance. Amongst the changes it brought to health insurance access are created new subsidies for purchasing insurance, market place exchanges to facilitate easier purchase, a penalty if you do not obtain insurance (the individual mandate), and an expansion of Medicaid. Changes in health insurance coverage across Spokane County, Washington State and the nation are documented in this indicator, the share of the population under age 65 without health insurance coverage, through the past seven years. With 2014 estimates just in, we can now examine the changes in numbers the year before and after the implementation of the insurance regulations of the ACA.

Health insurance in the United States is delivered both publically and through private insurance companies. Most working adults and their families receive health insurance from private sector providers through their employers. Eligibility for public health insurance is determined by age, income, and disability, amongst other factors. There are 3 public health insurance programs in the United States. Medicare primarily insures those 65 years and older. The Medicaid program is nation’s public health insurance for low-earners; originally designed for low-income mothers and children, the ACA gives states the option to expand Medicaid coverage to include everybody living within 138% of the federal poverty line. Children in families that earn an income within 200% of the poverty line can become insured by
the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Medicaid and CHIP are administered by the states. Medicaid in Washington State is called Apple Health.

Examining this indicator, the Share of the Population of Spokane County Under the Age of 65 that are Uninsured, which counts the civilian, noninstitutionalized population of Spokane County, we see in 2013 prior to the full implementation the ACA, an estimated 70,312 people in Spokane, or 17.4%, did not have health insurance. After 2014 this number had fallen to 33,077, or 8.2% of the population. This 9.2% decrease is significantly larger than Washington State’s 4.1% (14.7% to 10.6%) decrease and the nation’s 3.5% (17.0%-13.5%) in the same time span. Spokane-based Better Health Together Executive Director Alison White suggests that the main reason for the sharp decrease in uninsured for Spokane compared to the state and nation is threefold: 1) The state of Washington opted to expand Medicaid, 2) Spokane has a high number people that now qualify for Medicaid under the expansion, and 3) Spokane County had a robust and comprehensive network of agencies with in-person assistants working to sign-up the newly Medicaid eligible.

The statistics suggest that ACA has been effective in providing health insurance to the insured population in Spokane County. When asked if there were other factors beside the ACA that could have contributed to these improvements in coverage, White gives a firm no; the changes are “All about (the ACA). 100 percent,” reiterating that state’s Medicaid expansion plays a particularly large part.

Despite these improvements, the CII graph that shows that 8.2% of Spokane County remains uninsured. White suggests a couple reasons for this. Seasonal workers whose pay fluctuates between qualifying for Medicaid and only qualifying for a subsidy are a big part of this number. Also, the subsidy is sometimes inadequate for some lower income families, where it is cheaper to pay the penalty then try to purchase insurance.

Health insurance is important to both the patient and the care provider. Being uninsured and underinsured often leaves a person with an array of challenges as they bear the high cost of medical service out of pocket, resulting in compromised health in the face of less or no preventive care. Uninsured persons are often totally dependent on the emergency room for health care. Increased insurance coverage also likely decreases the market price of health care services because hospitals cannot turn down patients. They have to indirectly pass the billions of dollars in costs for uncompensated care for the uninsured on to funders of public
programs and participants in private health plans. Further study is undoubtedly called for to understand the impact of the ACA’s insurance regulations on the price of health care delivery. Additional analysis of the health care landscape post-ACA can inform solutions to improve access the 8.2% of Spokane County that is counted as not having coverage.

**New “Smarter Balanced Assessment” Produces First Year Results by Scott Richter and Dr. Patrick Jones**

Standardized testing in public schools has always been somewhat of a hot button topic. In Washington State, standardized tests have included the WASL, WCAP, HSPE, MSP, and general end of course exams. During the 2014-2015 school year, students began taking the Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA).

The change to the SBA is multi-faceted. The SBA is in line with the Common Core State Standards. According to the Common Core, “learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade. The standards were created to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live.” Additionally, the majority of U.S. states have switched either a portion or all of their standardized testing to the SBA. This facilitates a collective effort among states to work together to determine the standard results expected from students who take one of the SBA’s. It also allows direct comparisons of the testing results across state lines.

It is a fair question to ask why there has been another change to the standardized testing public school students in Washington State must take. First, the SBA was the result of extensive research and is founded upon existing evidence-based programs. Second, the strengths and weaknesses of existing standardized tests, both domestic and abroad, were used in the development of the SBA. Third, the SBA is better aligned with both college and career expectations. In fact, many colleges and universities across the U.S. are using SBA results as proof that a student is prepared for college level courses and can allow for an exemption from remedial courses. Specifically in Washington State, this includes all 6 public universities, 34 community and technical colleges, and 9 independent colleges and universities. Gene Sharratt, Executive Director of the Washington Student Achievement Council, wrote, “Use of the Smarter Balanced
Assessment as a means of placing students directly into college-level coursework will have a positive impact by increasing access, reducing remediation, and improving career and college attainment.”

Further reasoning for the switch in Washington State to the SBA: it produces quicker results, provides better accommodation for both students with disabilities and those who are English language learners, is computer adaptive providing individually tailored progressively more difficult questions when students are showing they have mastered the skills in the test, and it is less expensive to administer than recent state standardized tests by approximately $6 million a year.

Although the administration of the new tests will be less expensive than previous standardized tests, Pam Veltri, Assistant Superintendent of Learning Services with the Mead School District, says the “technology is expensive and many schools / districts do not have adequate technology to implement the Smarter Balanced Assessment.”

There are four SBA score categories, known as achievement levels. According to the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, the four achievement levels are: Level 1 does not meet the grade-level performance standard; Level 2 nearly meets grade-level performance standards; Level 3 meets grade-level performance standards; and Level 4 exceeds grade-level performance standards. Pam Veltri explains “The Smarter Balanced Assessment is merely a tool to determine if students have mastered each standard.” The increased expectations of the SBA will now provide students an opportunity “to take what they have learned and understand how to apply that learning to new and unique situations.”

Currently, there is only one year of available data for the English language arts and math SBA, and a comparison to previous years where different tests were used is not possible. The most eye-opening aspect of the graph is perhaps the very low share of test takers who are meeting or exceeding the test result standards.

This is primarily due to the much higher expectations of the SBA as they aim to better prepare students for both life and college than prior Washington State assessments. The same phenomenon occurred when the WASL and other past standardized tests were first implemented. The standards are so much higher, there is speculation that students will be better prepared for college – even those who never intended to pursue higher education. Some of these students, in particular, those that scored at Levels 3 and 4, will realize they are prepared to enter college even though they never intended. The anticipated result is more graduating high school students will be prepared to enter college than before. Previously, these people more than likely went right into the job market with only a high school diploma. Now, these types of students will have the option of attending college because high school and increased expectations of the SBA has prepared them.
All this makes it sound like the SBA come without controversy, which is untrue. Some of the noteworthy issues with the SBA is that it takes around 9 hours to take the test and many weeks of class time dedicated to preparation, students without a computer at home will be at a disadvantage, and the added stress to students of taking a much more difficult test. So much so that already in Washington State, especially on the West Side, students and parents are opting out of the SBA in larger and larger numbers. When a student and parent opt out, their score is counted as “0” and is still added in to the figures of students who did take the SBA contributing to the overall scores for schools and school districts.

On a student level, there are many stories beginning to surface about the anxiety and stress involved with taking standardized tests — especially tests like the SBA where more students are expected to fail than meet standards for the first few years the test is administered.

Regardless of opposition, Washington State is maintaining the SBA as their primary standardized tests for Math and English Language Arts, and no changes are expected any time soon.

Drilling more deeply into one year worth of data, we see the shares meeting standards are low (just as expected), but aren’t that far off the state benchmark. For English Language Arts results, the share meeting or exceeding standards for 4th graders in Spokane County was 56.3% vs. 4th graders in Washington State was 55.6%. For 11th graders in Spokane County, the share was 52.5% vs. 51.5% in Washington State. Looking at the Math results, the share meeting or exceeding standards for 4th graders in Spokane County was 54.5% vs. 55.1% for 4th graders in Washington State; for 11th graders in Spokane County, it was 33.2% vs. 29.0% in Washington State.

Overall, the SBA not only represents a change in which specific standardized tests are required in Washington State, but it also coincides with changes to the overall style of the curriculum. Pam Veltri believes as a result, student problem solving abilities will significantly increase. She says “Past practices in K-12 education was to teach a curriculum that is very wide in scope with limited application. The new practices is to teach a curriculum that has narrowed but with deep application and understanding.” Students will be able to take what they have learned and understand how to apply that learning to new and unique situations.”

Although all students are required to take the SBA at some point, it is important to note that not all schools are included in the SBA results.
According to OSPI’s accountability rules, institutional, tribal, reengagement, and alternative schools with greater than 50% of their enrollment from outside of their district are not included in school district level data. Although, it is true on a school district level they are excluded, but they are included in the county level estimates.

Heading into the future, this indicator should mostly see increases from the initial year of test results. Additionally, it will be interesting to see how other indicators are affected as a result of the SBA. Perhaps as we look at this indicator in the future, we need to also consider the impact it will have on other indicators, such as the share of the population with an associate’s degree, a bachelor’s or graduate degree, first-year post high school higher education attendance rates, and the share of employment by education level.

_Funded Research at Local Universities Increases for Third Consecutive Year_

_by Scott Richter and Dr. Patrick Jones_

Research at higher education institutions fosters a continuing inquiry among faculty and staff, helping to not only keep them abreast of advances in their specialty, but to potentially put them and their schools on the cutting edge of research in any given academic field. This research has two pedagogical benefits: it informs faculty teaching and it often allows students to participate in the research, providing them with valuable experience. In addition, research brings economic value to the county. In most cases, the funding represents an injection of new dollars into the local economy. Finally, grant and contract dollars that are awarded to local higher education institutions expand the collective knowledge.

Ruth Galm, Executive Director, Grant and Research Development at Eastern Washington University, explains the impact of grant and contract dollars. For universities, “they provide opportunities for faculty to conduct research, publish, and stay current in their fields.” For students, grant and contract dollars “support student research assistantships and community service [as well as] curriculum development and laboratory instrumentation.”

Dr. John Roll, Senior Vice Chancellor at Washington State University Spokane, agrees. Roll explains that “Grants dollars enable investigators to acquire new knowledge and apply it to real world issues. The process and the knowledge gained are crucial to educating students who are often directly involved in the research or educated by those engaged in the research.”

According to the National Science Board (NSB), “The continuing importance of academia to the nation’s overall R&D [research & development] effort is well accepted. This is especially true for its contribution to the generation of new knowledge through basic research. Since 1998, academia has accounted for more than half of the basic research performed in the United States”.

Generally the majority of R&D in academia in universities across the nation is heavily on the research side. The NSB estimates that, “96% of academic R&D expenditures in 2002 went for research (74% for basic and 22% for applied) and 4% for development”. Although, expenditures are important in the overall
analysis of grant and contract dollars awarded at local colleges and universities, it is important to note that this indicator does not track expenditures.

There are four major types of funding sources for R&D: Institutional Funds, State and Local Government Funds, Industry Funds, and “Other Sources”. Institutional funds are internal higher education institutional funds that are separately budgeted, unreimbursed indirect costs related to externally funded R&D projects, and cost-sharing on grants. These can also include income from owning patents, licenses, or income from providing patient care. State and local government funds are only those that are directly targeted to academic R&D activities. Industry funds are from the private sector and are growing faster than any other funding source, but still constitute a very small portion of the overall grant and contract dollars awarded to universities (approximately 1.2% of all grant and contract dollars in 1994). “Other” sources of funds generally come from health agencies, nonprofits, and from private individuals.

Each university or college has a department specifically for the procurement, management, and development of grant and contract dollars. Inside each of these departments within the individual colleges and universities, extensive records of how and what the funds were used for. Every dollar must be accounted for and be verified that the funds were spent appropriately within the parameters of the grant. At Eastern Washington University, Ruth Galm and her team also provide “direct, one-on-one assistance in all aspects of our area of responsibility, from proposal development to regulatory and fiscal compliance and final reporting and project close out.” At Washington State University Spokane, John Roll explains one of the unseen roles of the Office of Grant and Research Development is to “help investigators find opportunities to fund their work and helping investigators prepare quality proposals for funding”.

This indicator, the Total Grant and Contract Dollars Awarded to Higher Education Institutions, combines grant and contract dollars awarded to Community Colleges of Spokane (Spokane Community College and Spokane Falls Community College), Eastern Washington University, Gonzaga University, Washington State – Spokane and Whitworth University. During the fiscal year ending in 2014, the five higher education institutions in Spokane County secured a total of $55.37 million in grant and contract dollars. This is an increase from $43.90 million at the end of FY 2002, representing an increase of 26% during the same time period. Additionally throughout the series, 2014 represented the second highest year for total
grant and contract dollars awarded in the county, surpassed only by 2011 when the combined total was $56.11 million. On a per capita basis, 2014 ranked fourth highest in the series, following closely behind $118.72 during 2011, $117.24 during 2008, and $116.60 during 2010.

The total grant and contract dollars awarded to higher education has fluctuated throughout the series, from a high of $56.11 million in 2011, to a low of $41.35 million in 2003.

Extramural funding to higher education institutions in Spokane County is the sum of awards from organizations outside the institutions. The awards may take the form of local, state or federal governmental grants, or they may be contracts with the private sector. The funds support research at the four institutions.

Looking ahead, with expansions in the U-District and the continued goal of developing a full medical school in Spokane, it is highly possible this indicator will see positive changes in the upcoming years. Ruth Galm says “the expansion of both medical and dental education in the area presents a lot of possibilities for collaboration.” John Roll agrees and believes “we will see steady growth in health sciences research for the foreseeable future”.

5 Questions with Pamela Tietz – Executive Director, Spokane Housing Authority

1. You moved here within the last two years from Port Angeles to take the helm of the Spokane Housing Authority. What are your early impressions about state of low-income housing in Spokane and surrounding counties?

   Across the state, low-income households are struggling to find an affordable place to live. This need is readily apparent when you consider that SHA opened the Spokane County voucher program waiting list earlier this year and we received 4,587 applications in just five days. In each of the six counties served by SHA, the affordable housing gap is significantly higher than the state average. For example, in Spokane County, there are just 37 available affordable units for every 100 renter-households earning less than 50% of the area median income.

2. What are the larger trends you see in low income housing that make sense in this area?

   The creation of Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) options makes sense. PSH is an innovative and proven solution that combines affordable housing with services that help people who face the most complex challenges to live with stability, autonomy and dignity. SHA recently implemented programs that pair rental assistance with local non-profit partners to create PSH units. With the help of partners like Catholic Charities, Frontier Behavioral Health, Northeast Community Center, Transitions, YWCA, DSHS Aging and Long-Term Care, World Relief, Spokane County Supportive Living, Volunteers of America, SNAP and Goodwill, we are creating newly constructed PSH and are assisting with rent and services in privately owned units.
3. At the Housing Authority, what are the data measures you pay most attention to?

The SHA team has been working to change its approach to better connect with existing systems and target our limited resources to serve our most vulnerable citizens. The linkage between health, housing and education systems is crucial in addressing the causes of homelessness and the overall need for affordable housing. While it is a complex issue, we must make the implementation of data sharing with healthcare and education partners to related outcomes like housing stabilization, chronic disease management and educational attainment a priority.

4. You’ve joined the steering committee of Priority Spokane since the organization has targeted homeless youth in K-8. Do you think that, collectively, the community can significantly improve the lot of these kids?

Absolutely. When homeless families are helped to find housing, providing children with stability, a place to call home, and a permanent school where they can thrive, good things happen. There are great program models out there to learn from. For example, Tacoma Public Schools and Tacoma Housing Authority began a unique program in 2011 involving McCarver Elementary School families that provides housing support for 50 families for up to five years. Since then, for students involved in the program, attendance has increased and test scores risen – two demonstrable pieces of data pointing to the success of the program. SHA’s is working with local school districts, Priority Spokane and other non-profits to design a similar program.

5. As you survey the information on the Community Indicators site, what trends have jumped out at you?

I naturally gravitated toward the education indicators. Kindergarten readiness, on-time graduation rates and overall educational attainment are indicators we need to pay close attention to. I believe if we start paying close attention to these issues now, over time, this underserved population will thrive and will have fewer issues to deal with later.