

## OPEN DOORS PROGRAM PROFILE

# SkillSource-Wenatchee

*This profile was produced as part of the Community Partnerships for Reengagement Initiative to promote shared learning about promising youth reengagement practices and program models in the Open Doors system. In spring 2023, we collected data from six Open Doors sites (two in each pathway: GED-plus, high school diploma, and college) to develop profiles of programs with evidence of promising student outcomes. Information about this project and the methods used to develop this profile are provided at the end of this report.*

SkillSource is a nonprofit agency that is part of the Washington WorkSource system and fiscal agent for the local Workforce Development Board. SkillSource provides leadership, administration, oversight, and implementation of education and workforce development programs in Adams, Chelan, Douglas, Grant, and Okanogan Counties. With learning centers located in downtown Wenatchee, Omak, and Othello, SkillSource is a well-established organization with a broad community presence. Multiple generations of families participate in its programs.

This program operates as a partnership between SkillSource and Wenatchee School District. Established in 1992 as an alternative learning program, the partnership transitioned to Open Doors in 2013 to offer a more flexible program that allowed them, as a SkillSource representative said, to “meet our students where they are at” because they have “a lot going on in their lives” that poses a barrier to education. SkillSource’s Wenatchee Learning Center also runs a small alternative learning program for students under 16 who are not yet eligible for Open Doors.

This profile is focused on students in the GED-plus program, but SkillSource-Wenatchee also offers high school diploma and career pathway options through Open Doors. Through another provider, Wenatchee School District offers an online Open Doors option for a smaller group of students unable to participate in the in-person SkillSource program.

### SkillSource-Wenatchee Open Doors

- GED-plus pathway
- Established in 2013
- Nonprofit partnership with district and multiple public and community agencies
- In-person morning, afternoon, and evening classes offered four days/week and one Friday/month.
- In-person and virtual case management
- Optional project-based learning/work experiences
- **138** students enrolled in 2020–21
- Average age at enrollment: **17**
- Average credits at enrollment: **9**

SkillSource braids state (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction [OSPI]) and federal funding (Title 1 and other discretionary grants) to offer students community-based learning experiences, career preparation, and barrier-reduction support. The program also uses OSPI school improvement funds for continuous improvement, most recently to strengthen and streamline its case management services.

## Partnership Structure and Roles

Partners communicated that over time the local community has become more comfortable with offering pathways outside of comprehensive high school. In addition to enrolling students from Wenatchee School District, students can choose to transfer into the program from smaller districts in Chelan and Douglas counties, including Cascade, Cashmere, Chelan, Eastmont and Entiat when approved by Wenatchee School District.



In a public school where there are just too many faces to kind of really care ... here they'll really see why you're failing, try and help you. And even not just for academics, [also for] outside of school stuff.

SkillSource student<sup>1</sup>

SkillSource-Wenatchee staff members describe it as a “niche” program designed to be a “last option” for students who need a small, personalized environment after exhausting other opportunities available in their district. The program feels “less institutional” than district schools as the smaller environment enables staff members to plan instruction around each student’s individual interests and goals. This relationship-based approach provides a “balance” of flexibility and accountability that helps students thrive.



These students need to be treated with respect and they need to be treated like adults that are owning their own pathway towards education ... [SkillSource staff members] just do a really good job of creating that smaller feel and creating more of a relationship with students so that we can actually hold them accountable because they care ... and they're invested.

Wenatchee School District staff member

SkillSource partners closely with the Wenatchee School District and a diverse set of organizations, institutions of higher education, and public agencies to offer wraparound support and community- and work-based learning experiences. Partners describe the program as a unique opportunity in the region that

benefits not only students but the entire Greater Wenatchee Valley, as students leave the program ready to work in a variety of jobs.

Key partners include:

- **Wenatchee School District (WSD)** – The district works closely with SkillSource to ensure that students maintain access to district resources and services. A district-employed registrar is based on site to manage referrals, enrollment, and tracking. A special education teacher works on site several times each week to help staff members support any student with an Individual Education Plan, while multilingual services educators “push in” to support individual students as needed. The program also collaborates with district staff members to help students access wraparound resources related to healthcare, housing, and parenting. Staff members also coordinate with the Wenatchee Valley Technical Center operated by WSD for students seeking additional career and technical education options while attending the Learning Center.
- **Washington State University Extension** – Three times each year, up to 20 Open Doors students participate in the six-week Eco Stewardship Program. In this immersive field experience, students learn about natural resource careers while working alongside their peers and professionals on projects across the region. They explore potential careers, connect with employers, and earn minimum wage while participating in activities to strengthen their social, emotional, and leadership skills. This opportunity is funded with Title I and Career Connect Washington regional grants.
- **City of Wenatchee Parks and Recreation, Wenatchee Museum, and other local employers** – Many students each year participate in the SkillSource Title I work experience program, working in various roles (e.g., landscaping, camps, conservation worker, office clerk). SkillSource Title I funding pays students a minimum wage and provides career counseling and support services that enable the employers and agencies to train a more diverse group of young people. SkillSource Title I and Open Doors partner with local agencies and employers to provide project-based learning in which students earn a stipend for meeting work readiness and project outcomes.
- **Wenatchee Valley College (WVC)** – SkillSource contracts with WVC to operate a GED and High School Plus program at the same site. Students can transition into this program as they age out of Open Doors.

## Student Population

In 2020–21, the SkillSource-Wenatchee program enrolled 138 students. The program’s peak enrollment was 189 students in 2016–17. Across six academic years (2015–16 to 2020–21), on average the program serves a higher percentage of students who identify as **Latino/a/x** and students who identify as **male** (table 1) compared with Open Doors students statewide. The program also enrolls a higher percentage of students **eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, special education, learning assistance, English**

**language learner, and migrant education programs.** Students enter SkillSource-Wenatchee with fewer high school credits and a lower GPA compared with the statewide average for Open Doors students.

Students are referred to the program by schools, friends and family, probation officers, and community-based organizations. Most of the young people we spoke with learned about the program from a family member or friend who participated in Open Doors or another SkillSource workforce development program. District staff members say the program is a fit for students who are ready to benefit from the opportunity to quickly complete their GED and get work experience.

**Tables 1–5. Average Student Characteristics (2015/16–2020/21), SkillSource-Wenatchee Open Doors**

**TABLE 1**

Gender	Percentage
Male	58%
Female	42%
Non-binary	0%

**TABLE 2**

Race	Percentage
White	49%
Latino/a/x	43%
Two or more races	4%
Black or African American	1%
American Indian or Alaska Native	2%
Asian	<1%
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	<1%
Race not provided	0%

**TABLE 3**

High school experiences and programs	Percentage
Free or reduced-price lunch	87%
Learning assistance program	33%
Experienced homelessness	23%
Special education	27%
504 plan	5%
English language learner	15%
Migrant education program	13%

**TABLE 4**

Previous high school progress	
Cumulative high school grade point average at Open Doors enrollment	1.11
Cumulative high school credits earned at Open Doors enrollment	8.68

**TABLE 5**

	Age
Average age (first year in program)	17

Note: All data originally came from Comprehensive Education Data and Research System data files and are students’ high school records.

Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the Washington State Education Research and Data Center.

SkillSource staff members describe their students as “resilient” and ready for a “fresh start” in a new setting after experiencing barriers to education. Many students are caring for family members, experience housing instability, and/or are working. In recent years, staff members have noticed an increase in referrals for young people who are managing mental health issues such as anxiety.



Each one of our students comes with a story and each one of them is different. The beauty of Open Doors is it allows you—with the resources that you have—to meet students where they're at, because every plan is truly individual.

SkillSource staff member

## Program Design and Implementation

### STAFFING STRUCTURE

SkillSource staff members say they wear “many hats” with roles that vary due to funding constraints. There are four certified **instructors** (two full time), two **co-funded Title I case managers**, one **program assistant**, and an **AmeriCorps service member** in the program. The lead instructor is also the day-to-day **learning center manager** with support from the **managing director**; both leaders have been with the program since it was established. The district funds a **registrar** who manages enrollment and tracks attendance and academic progress. The registrar also shares information with the district (e.g., providing paperwork for accessing additional services, compiling data for reports) and the local detention center. The registrar is based at SkillSource and is often students’ first point of contact, sitting at the front desk and setting a welcoming tone.

The full-time instructors take the lead on individual academic support for students, sitting with the students while they are working on their GED coursework and offering one-on-one instruction as needed. The Title 1 case managers are funded through federal programs and provide wraparound support and access to work and career development opportunities. The youth trainers team-teach the initial academic and career workshop which includes aptitude, interest, and career assessments and exploration.

All staff members play a role in case management; they meet individually with students, contribute case notes, and provide students with access to resources. On Fridays, all staff members meet for a three-hour, case management “**team huddle**” to focus on individual students and thoroughly review the cases of students who need more intensive support. The team discusses academic progress, identifies needed wraparound services, and shares strategies that work well with the student. Staff members can also use this day to conduct home visits and connect students with community resources, including taking students to appointments.



We do a lot of things that aren't necessarily our role, but to get the students where they need to be, we'll go do that.

SkillSource staff member

There is an intentional overlap in staff roles so that they can work together to find ways to support the students. Staff members recognize that it is critical to, as one put it, “put our ego aside” and ask colleagues for help when they experience challenges connecting with a student. SkillSource used a school improvement grant to improve case management meetings and a Google site to track case management data so they can identify patterns across students. Staff members recently participated in a training to learn new ways to support student mental health—a growing need as community mental health resources are limited. Staff members have attended ongoing “Heart and Mind Training” sessions to sustain high productivity, excellent customer service, positive student engagement, and a positive workplace environment. As part of SkillSource’s larger workforce development activities, staff members have opportunities to learn about and build relationships with local organizations that offer wraparound resources.

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## PROGRAM MODEL

### *Pre-program*

**Multiple sources of referrals.** Youth may be referred through the district, friends or family, probation officers, or community-based organizations.

### *Enrollment and onboarding*


**Orientation session.** Interested students participate in an information session offered on Thursdays where they receive enrollment paperwork from the registrar. One-on-one sessions are scheduled if needed.

**Academic and Career Training Workshop.** New students participate in a three-day workshop to learn about the program, participate in community-building activities, take assessments related to their academic skills and career interests, and complete a survey to identify needs for wraparound support. Staff members use this information to develop individual plans.

### *Program experience*

**Instruction.** Most students come to the learning center for three hours, four days a week to work towards their GED using the Odysseyware learning platform, with supplemental individual and small-group instruction from staff members. Students can choose a morning, afternoon, or evening session. Since the pandemic, some students may be approved to work from home and are given a Chromebook and/or mobile hot spot. SkillSource operates the region’s GED testing center so students can take their GED test at the learning center to reduce barriers to completion.

**Individual academic support.** Instructors work with students on an individual learning and career development plan and revisit the plan with them monthly. They track academic progress in Odysseyware as well as GED pretest/test scores and offer daily individualized coaching to address skill gaps.



**Project-based learning and career exposure.** Students have opportunities to participate in project- and work-based learning experiences in the community. They explore career options and meet staff members from local organizations, employers, and public agencies. Youth receive a stipend or a wage, as well as credit, for this work. About 50 percent of students are enrolled in the Workforce Investment Title I program.

**Wraparound support.** The program serves lunch and snacks and provides gift cards to help students meet basic needs and get clothes and supplies they need for jobs and internships. It refers students to community agencies for support with parenting, health, and mental health in addition to support from district nurses and a homeless liaison. Ongoing staff communication and weekly “team huddles” coordinate referral and access to these services.

**Additional activities.** Interspersed throughout the online coursework, staff members facilitate additional learning activities focused on leadership, work readiness, arts and crafts, and physical education. Students have the option to come one Friday a month for special activities such as guest speakers. Staff members also take students to community events such as career exploration nights.

### *Next steps support*

**Postsecondary planning.** Throughout their time in the program, staff members talk with students about their career interests and connection to completing their high school education. They adjust individual education and career plans in conversation with students as their interests evolve over time through project-based learning and work experiences. The Title I youth trainers provide additional postsecondary transition support to students enrolled in the federal program.

## Student Progress and Outcomes

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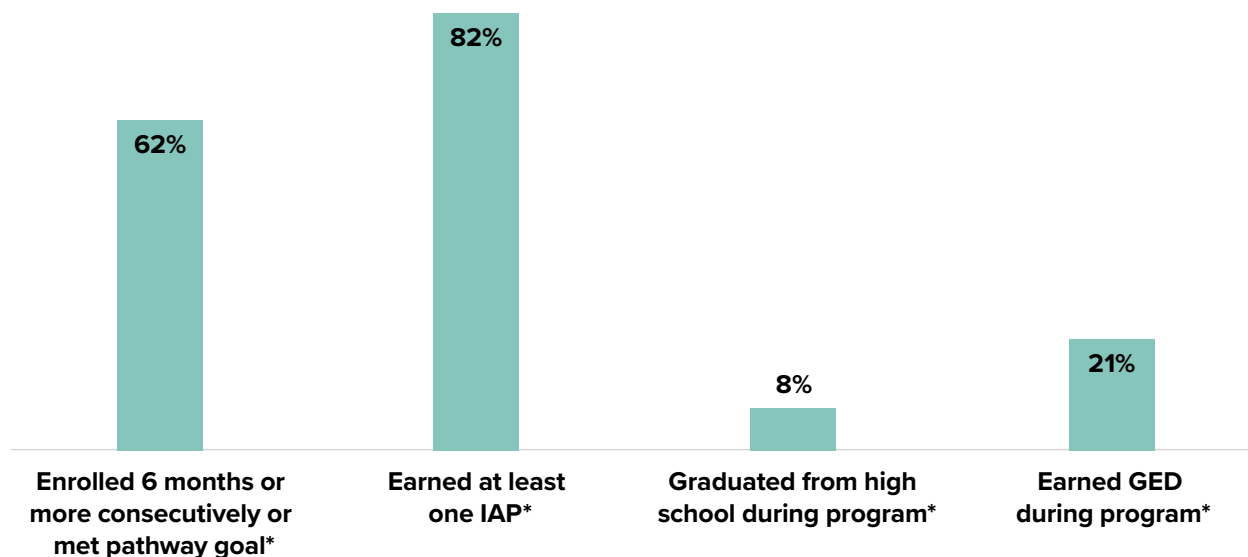
### SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT AND ACADEMIC PROGRESS

*Most students earned at least one indicator of academic progress, and more than a quarter earned their GED or HS diploma.*

Across six academic years (2015–16 to 2020–21), on average 62 percent of students sustained their enrollment in SkillSource-Wenatchee for six months (or completed high school) and 82 percent earned at least one indicator academic progress (figure 1). This is a higher rate compared with Open Doors GED-plus programs statewide, which is 44 percent and 65 percent, respectively. On average, **21 percent of students earned a GED**, which is higher than the average for Open Doors GED-plus programs statewide (16 percent). Additionally, **8 percent earned a high school diploma** during the program. In addition, **12 percent of students on average met the career pathway goal** by earning an industry-recognized certificate or participating in an apprenticeship or work-based learning while enrolled.



**Figure 1. Program outcomes, SkillSource-Wenatchee (2015–16 to 2020–21)**



\*Higher than the statewide average for the GED-plus pathway.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Washington State Education Research and Data Center.

### ***Personalized instruction in a supportive small group environment engages students and supports progress towards their academic goals.***

Current and former students cited multiple ways that the program personalizes support for each student. Overall, students appreciate being able to **work at their own pace**. Some students liked being able to move quickly and “grind” through coursework while others appreciated that they could let staff members know when they were feeling overwhelmed and needed a break. Students say that they have “room to breathe” in the program. They like the flexibility of the program schedule, with multiple options for when and how they can participate, as well as ease in modifying their schedule and individual education plan.



SkillSource was really a whole new take on studying and learning. Instead of just giving everyone the same kind of curriculum, they are kind of trying to work with you to see ... what you are good in.

SkillSource student

Students often expressed appreciation for **supplemental instruction customized for each student**. This includes coaching on study skills as well as teaching content in areas where students need additional practice. Students especially value how the program adapts instruction to fit their learning styles (e.g., visual, audio) based on an assessment they take in the introductory academic and career workshop.



Students also relayed how the program is responsive to their need for **accommodations**, such as taking tests in a separate, quiet space. They suggested that the small, personalized environment of the program is a good fit for students who are neurodivergent or managing mental health issues.

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## SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING

### *Students expand their social skills and networks through the program.*

Students describe a strong **sense of community** developed through project-based learning, team-building activities, special events, and after-school activities. Group activities help to reduce stress and “open you up” to new people and experiences. Students say that peers and staff members foster a welcoming climate where people with diverse identities and interests become friends because there is “no drama.” A few students described feeling “inspired” by witnessing older students come back to SkillSource to complete high school through other programs located on site. Students, partners, and staff members often portrayed the program as a “family” environment where young people experience acceptance and belonging.



At SkillSource there’s no judgment towards you if you ask questions, or what you wear, what you do, or what you look like ... So that’s kind of the nice thing about coming here ... they accept everybody.

SkillSource student

Staff members and youth both describe how the program provides opportunities for students to practice **communication and self-advocacy skills**. For example, staff members coach youth in managing conflict with peers, talking with employers, and contacting wraparound service providers. Several students learned how to ask others for help because staff members made them feel comfortable doing so.



Students’ guards are still up for a good three months until they get to know we’re not going to put a label on you. We don’t even know your past.

SkillSource staff member

Students develop **positive relationships with program staff members**. Through personalized encouragement and support, staff members help them, as a student said, “get out of your comfort zone” to try new opportunities related to their interests. While students appreciate that staff members notice when they are struggling and “reach out” to offer support, they also say that staff members respect their autonomy and do not pressure them to do things before they are ready.



SkillSource staff their main goal isn't to just control and dictate. It's just to be there if you are ready for the help ... You have to actually want it yourself.

SkillSource student

*Barrier reduction support enables students to take advantage of opportunities that help them envision their future work, education, and career.*

All participants discussed the power of **project- and work-based learning** experiences offered through SkillSource. This includes a six-week, intensive, crew-based fieldwork experience, internships, summer jobs, and service projects. Staff members say they give students the option to participate in these additional learning opportunities as they start to demonstrate progress and commitment to the program. Through these experiences, students say they “feel productive” and gain valuable work skills, connections with professionals in fields of interest to them, and letters of recommendation.



I did a work experience [at a community agency] ... and it has made me start thinking about possibly becoming some type of social worker, because I know that they do a lot for the community. So SkillSource has given me that idea of a career when I didn't really know at all what I wanted to do before.

SkillSource student

Staff members observe significant growth in students as these projects place them in new settings and roles that are “out of their comfort zones.” Community partners report that former students often come back and work with them after they transition out of Open Doors.

With **individual coaching** from staff members, students also explore their career interests and apply for jobs. Students say that staff members help them develop a “roadmap” to help them figure out the steps they need to take to realize their goals. The program also provides **material support** to reduce barriers students may experience in accessing these opportunities. This includes providing work gear and supplies, professional clothes, covering the costs of certification courses, and providing gas cards funded primarily by the Title I programs.

# Key Strategies

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## PROGRAM STRATEGIES



### *Outreach and relationship-building*

- Use multiple platforms to communicate, including visits at home and work.
- Offer an “open door policy” to access staff members as needed during the program.
- Facilitate community-building activities with students and offer extracurriculars.



### *Case management and wraparound support*

- Check in with students daily about academic progress and needed supports.
- Huddle weekly to coordinate student support across diverse staff roles.
- Partner closely with district and community organizations to offer wraparound support and project-based learning opportunities.
- Provide food, transportation, and basic supplies (e.g., toiletries, work attire, gas cards)



### *Relevant and flexible learning opportunities that build on student experiences and strengths*

- Extend multiple schedule options (morning, afternoon, evening) or learning from home.
- Provide customized academic support from instructors.
- Offer project-based learning, internships, career exploration, and job coaching to prepare students for their next step.



### *Student voice and choice*

- Empower students to drive their learning plan and make decisions about content and schedule.
- Survey students around their interests in additional activities and supports.

# Partnership Strategies

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## LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIPS THAT STRENGTHEN THE OVERALL COMMUNITY

All partners portrayed the partnerships with SkillSource as mutually beneficial. The program enables the district to serve students who need more intensive support than is possible in a typical school setting. Other partners appreciate diversifying and expanding the population of young people who work for them or participate in their programs. Partners say that the program fills a critical community gap with a unique combination of education, career preparation, and wraparound services that help young people to thrive and contribute their skills to the region.

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## CO-LOCATION OF SERVICES AND BRAIDED FUNDING EXPAND ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY

While students enroll to complete their GED, the program provides them with opportunities to do more. The partners understand that SkillSource weaves together funds from a variety of sources to support partnerships that get students out of the classroom and into the community. The program uses grant funding to provide incentives for students as they prepare to enter the workforce through these project-based learning experiences. The co-location of programs and staff at the same site facilitates a “smooth transition” for students as they access job training, wraparound services, or further education.

## About this Project

The [Community Partnerships for Reengagement Initiative \(CPRI\)](#) is a collaboration between [Education Northwest](#) and Washington’s Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to strengthen the capacity of the Open Doors system and to increase equitable education and workforce outcomes for youth. Our purpose is to use data to promote shared learning across the Open Doors system and nationally about promising youth reengagement practices and program models. This project is funded by the Ballmer Group and Kaiser Family Foundation.

Education Northwest worked closely with an advisory committee of local and national experts to identify practices and strategies that make a program effective and successful. We developed a statewide [Open Doors Theory of Action](#) in collaboration with the CPRI advisory committee, the Open Doors steering committee, and programs across the state. We also analyzed program and student data (2016–2021) to understand the short- and long-term outcomes for each program site and selected sites doing better than expected in meeting their pathway goal for students historically underserved in education. We also considered issues such as program size, location, provider type, and student characteristics in selecting sites that represent the diversity of program models and communities across the state.

In spring 2023, we collected data from six Open Doors sites (two in each pathway: GED-plus, high school diploma, and college) to develop profiles of programs with evidence of promising student outcomes.

For more information about the CPRI initiative or questions regarding the information presented in this memo, please contact Julie Petrokubi [julie.petrokubi@ednw.org](mailto:julie.petrokubi@ednw.org).

## Methods

Education Northwest developed this program profile from artifact review and interviews/focus groups with six SkillSource staff members, three district staff members, three community partners, and seven current or former students. Data was collected both online and during an in-person site visit. We analyzed quantitative program and student data (2016–2021) from the Washington State Education Research and Data Center to produce the student demographics and outcomes figures.

Thank you to the program team, district partners, and current and former students for taking the time to share your stories and perspectives about the SkillSource-Wenatchee Open Doors Program.

### *Recommended citation*

Petrokubi, J., Hodara M., & Fujita-Conrads, E. (2023). *Open Doors Program Profile: SkillSource Wenatchee*. Education Northwest.

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## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Due to the small sample size and need to preserve anonymity, we do not distinguish between quotations of Open Doors students and alumni in this profile report.