



Washington Thriving: Supporting Child, Youth, and Young Adult Behavioral Health

February 23, 2026 AI Summary

[Watch the LEVinar recording](#)

On February 23, the League of Education Voters (LEV) convened students, policy leaders, and community advocates from across Washington to explore *Washington Thriving*, the state's new prenatal-to-25 behavioral health strategic plan. The webinar brought together Washington State Representative **Lisa Callan**, Behavioral Health Catalyst Policy & Advocacy Director **Sarah Rafton**, and three student leaders—**Maya Morgan** of Shorewood High School, **Katelyn Cockrum** of Monroe High School, and **Mason Grose** of Toutle Lake High School. Their discussion illustrated the power of pairing policy design with lived experience.

LEV CEO **Arik Korman** opened the session by grounding the conversation in purpose and place. As a parent of a high school junior receiving special education services, he explained why advocacy is personal: "I advocate because of my son, so that every student can get what they need, when they need it, and how they need it." Korman also acknowledged the ancestral lands of Washington's 29 federally and non-federally recognized tribes, honoring Native and Indigenous elders, colleagues, and communities.

Why Washington Thriving? A Three-Year Journey Centered on Youth and Families

Sarah Rafton offered the first deep dive into the plan. Washington Thriving was born from a 2016 legislative mandate establishing the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Work Group (CYBHWG), a 40-member body including young people, families, state agency leads, legislators, and providers. In 2022, the legislature tasked the Work Group with creating a comprehensive strategic plan for prenatal through age 25.

Over the past three years, nearly 300 people contributed—parents, young adults, educators, tribal partners, early learning providers, and community-based organizations. A striking theme emerged: **regardless of region or identity, families face common barriers to behavioral health support**—long waits, staffing shortages, fragmented systems, and the difficulty of navigating school-based and community-based resources.

Youth voices, Rafton explained, played a central role. Middle and high school students consistently emphasized the importance of:

- **Feeling connected and belonging at school**
- **Having dependable, trauma-informed adults they can trust**
- **Receiving accurate information about behavioral health**
- **Accessing timely services through school, even if care occurs offsite**
- **Reducing long waits and removing stigma around seeking help**

“Behavioral health isn’t just about being with a counselor,” Rafton said. “It’s about your time in school, your time with family, your time in community. Well-being is about relationships and connection.”

The Vision: A True System of Care

Washington Thriving’s vision is ambitious: *a future where every pregnant person, baby, child, youth, and young adult is thriving—supported by their caregivers, families, and communities.*

The plan outlines three major pillars:

1. **People & Relationships:** Equitable care centered on what matters most to youth and families
2. **Services & Supports:** Expanding upstream toward prevention, early identification, and health promotion
3. **Infrastructure:** Coordinated, cross-sector systems that make care cohesive and easier to navigate

Rafton highlighted the urgency of coordinating the state’s many behavioral health efforts. “Today, behavioral health lives in different silos—schools, medical systems, juvenile justice, child welfare. People’s lives don’t exist in silos. We need to build bridges.”

House Bill 2429: Building the Foundation

To make Washington Thriving real, the state needs a structural backbone. That backbone is **House Bill 2429**, which would:

- Establish a **Governor’s Office leadership council** responsible for building a statewide system of care
- Identify **meaningful metrics** to track outcomes

- Map **existing behavioral health funding** across agencies to inform smarter investments
- Promote cross-agency coordination so young people receive help no matter where they enter the system

“HB 2429 is about swimming in the same direction,” Representative Callan later explained. “We need a framework guided by youth, families, and educators.”

K–12 Behavioral Health: House Bill 1634

Schools play a crucial role in identifying behavioral health needs early. Yet capacity varies widely across districts. To strengthen statewide school supports, **House Bill 1634** aims to:

- Build infrastructure and technical assistance
- Help schools adopt validated universal screeners
- Support districts in connecting students to care
- Improve coordination between OSPI, the Health Care Authority, ESDs, and community partners

Though HB 1634 contains no new funding—due to this year’s budget deficit—it repurposes existing dollars to improve training and system alignment.

Student Reflections: Privacy, Access, and Belonging

Throughout the webinar, Maya, Katelyn, and Mason offered grounded, deeply personal insights—highlighting how behavioral health systems look and feel to youth themselves.

Privacy matters

Students described how being handed a pass to visit a counselor can feel stigmatizing. Katelyn explained:

“If you get a pass saying, ‘Go to this area,’ people ask why you’re going. If there was a cleaner transition or drop-in times, it would feel more accessible.”

Mason echoed concerns about privacy and accessibility, suggesting private spaces for telehealth inside school buildings.

Surveys aren’t enough

Both Katelyn and Mason noted that students often treat behavioral surveys like the Healthy Youth Survey jokingly—with peers around, responses don’t always reflect reality.

Direct access is essential

Maya emphasized that simply handing out phone numbers or websites is ineffective.

“When students are just given phone numbers, they don’t think it’s something they should do—or they feel embarrassed. Direct access in schools would help them realize they’re not alone.”

Representative Lisa Callan: Listening, Learning, and Leading

When Representative Callan joined, fresh from the House floor, she grounded her remarks in both professional experience and personal understanding. As a former school board director and a legislator serving on committees related to human services, early learning, K-12 education, appropriations, and capital budget, she has seen Washington’s behavioral health gaps from every angle.

Callan explained why a statewide plan is so vital:

- Washington lacks a coordinated vision for youth behavioral health
- Agencies operate independently, often duplicating efforts or leaving gaps
- Students in rural areas face severe shortages, sometimes with **no** mental health providers for hours
- Schools are underfunded and overwhelmed

She also affirmed youth input as central to the work.

“We can only get this right if we hear your voice. Keep us accountable.”

The Impact of COVID and the Road Ahead

An audience member asked about post-pandemic behavioral challenges. Callan acknowledged the complexity:

- Some students thrived during remote learning
- Many experienced social isolation, trauma, or disrupted support
- Educators are navigating unprecedented behavioral needs without sufficient resources
- Families carry economic and emotional stress that students bring into the classroom

She argued that the solution lies in individualized approaches, strong relationships, and well-resourced schools—not punitive measures.

Return on Investment: The Case for Early Support

Asked about the economic impact of investing in behavioral health, Callan was direct:

- Every **\$1 spent on early intervention saves \$8–\$15** in long-term costs
- Early supports prevent more severe crises
- A true system of care reduces hospital boarding, suicidality, and deep-end behavioral crises
- Strong supports help young people transition into healthy adulthood

But more importantly, she emphasized, investments help children thrive.

Youth Closing Reflections: Hope, Ownership, and a Path Forward

As the discussion concluded, students shared powerful closing thoughts.

Maya voiced optimism:

“We would be shifting from reacting to behavioral health issues to being proactive. That will benefit students now and in the future.”

Katelyn highlighted the importance of reaching younger students, especially after the pandemic’s impact on elementary schools.

Mason spoke from lived experience:

“As somebody with a behavioral disorder, this plan is amazing to see go into effect. It’s a full-circle moment.”

A Shared Commitment to Washington’s Children and Youth

Korman closed the webinar by thanking speakers and participants and inviting continued engagement. Recordings, resources, and bill links will be shared in follow-up communications. LEV’s upcoming webinars will explore topics including the state’s millionaire’s tax and new research on supports for students experiencing homelessness.

“Each one of us has the right to feel safe and valued,” Korman said. “Together, we will fight for a world in which true educational and economic equity exists.”