



Washington state Teachers of the Year on Supporting Students to be Future-Ready

June 25, 2026 AI Summary

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A Year of Pressure, Growth, and Contradiction

For students, the past school year had been anything but ordinary.

Harsheela Vishnum, a sophomore at Edmonds-Woodway High School in the Edmonds School District, described it as a period of intense personal growth—one that demanded discipline and forced her beyond her comfort zone. Between advanced coursework, athletics, and extracurriculars, she found herself reshaped by the experience, even if it felt overwhelming at the time.

Jaden Hong, a sophomore at Eastlake High School in the Lake Washington School District, echoed that sentiment but framed the year as a paradox: both meaningful and intense. Students, he said, were juggling academics, expectations, and uncertainty about the future—all while trying to discover their own passions. The result was a mix of motivation and burnout.

Others agreed. The leap from freshman to sophomore year felt steeper than expected, and for juniors like Railey Lamb at Kennewick High School in the Kennewick School District, the pressure of rigorous programs like International Baccalaureate (IB) added another layer of difficulty. Yet across all these perspectives, one constant emerged: relationships with teachers mattered deeply. When students felt supported, they could navigate even the most demanding circumstances.

What's Working: Connection, Trust, and Real-World Learning

Despite the challenges, students were clear about what *is* working in schools today.

They spoke not of programs alone, but of people and practices that made learning meaningful:

- Teachers who treated students like adults and held them accountable helped build maturity and responsibility.
- Classes that connected academic content to real-world issues fostered engagement and critical thinking.
- Leadership opportunities—whether in student government or community initiatives—gave students confidence and practical skills.
- Daily interactions with teachers helped students develop self-advocacy, a skill they saw as essential for college and beyond.

A consistent thread ran through these insights: students thrive when they are trusted—when they are not just recipients of education, but active participants in it.

What's Missing: The Skills of Life, Not Just School

Yet, even as students acknowledged what was working, they were equally candid about what was missing.

Their critique was not about rigor—it was about relevance.

Students pointed to a lack of:

- Financial literacy and practical life skills
- Career exploration and access to mentorships
- Clear guidance on post-secondary pathways beyond traditional college

Mental health also emerged as a critical gap. Harsheela noted that conversations about emotional well-being remain stigmatized and insufficient, despite being fundamental to student success.

Underlying these concerns was a deeper issue: students felt they were being prepared to succeed *in school*, but not always to navigate *life after it*.

What Students Need to Thrive

When asked what they needed most, students' answers were strikingly human—and surprisingly simple.

They asked for:

- Sleep and humane school schedules, noting the toll of early start times on both health and opportunity
- Safe environments where they could ask questions without judgment
- High expectations paired with meaningful support
- A sense of belonging and voice in decision-making

They also raised a modern challenge: artificial intelligence. Rather than banning it, students urged schools to teach responsible and effective use, recognizing its inevitability in their futures.

Above all, they wanted to be seen—not as future adults, but as contributors *right now*.

Teachers Reflect: A Year That Felt “Heavy”

When the conversation turned to teachers, the tone shifted—but only slightly. Where students described pressure, teachers described weight.

Amy Campbell, the 2020 Washington state Teacher of the Year and a special education teacher in the Camas School District, summarized the year in one word: *heavy*. Budget cuts, layoffs, policy debates, and rising family stressors had created an environment of constant uncertainty.

Gabriela Whitemarsh, the 2026 Washington state Teacher of the Year and a bilingual math teacher in the Pasco School District, added that even moments of inspiration were intertwined with systemic challenges—funding crises, staffing changes, and community anxieties. Yet she also spoke of hope, rooted in the resilience of students and families who continue to show up every day.

Brooke Brown, the 2021 Washington state Teacher of the Year and an instructional equity specialist in the Franklin Pierce School District, described the year as filled with “noise”—external pressures that made it harder to focus on what truly mattered. For many educators, burnout felt close at hand, compounded by a sense of helplessness in the face of larger systemic issues.

Still, across all accounts, one truth remained unchanged: students are the reason teachers stay.

Rethinking “Future-Ready” Education

As the discussion moved toward solutions, a powerful reframing emerged.

Preparing students for the future, teachers argued, is not about training them for a workforce—it is about nurturing them as whole human beings.

This means:

- Centering belonging, dignity, and identity
- Encouraging curiosity, critical thinking, and creativity
- Supporting self-advocacy and personal growth
- Allowing students to choose pathways that reflect their values and aspirations

Jerad Koepp, the 2022 Teacher of the Year and Native Student Program specialist in North Thurston Public Schools, pushed the idea further. Education, he said, must resist becoming purely transactional or product-driven. It is fundamentally relational—a human endeavor that requires empathy, connection, and care.

In a world increasingly shaped by technology, he argued, the future will demand not less humanity, but more.

A Shared Insight: Students Are Already Shaping the Future

By the end of the conversation, a unifying idea had taken hold:

Students are not just preparing for the future—they are already co-creating it.

This realization reframed everything:

- Student voice is not optional—it is essential
- Education must adapt to student realities, not the other way around
- Communities must invest—not only financially, but relationally—in their schools

As the webinar closed, students reflected on what they had gained. They spoke of appreciation, of learning from teachers' perspectives, and of the importance of being included in decisions that affect them.

Conclusion

The webinar did not offer a simple answer to what it means to prepare students for an uncertain future. Instead, it revealed something more profound:

The future of education will not be defined by curricula alone, but by relationships, relevance, and respect for student voice.

In the end, the message was clear:

If schools can create environments where students feel seen, supported, and empowered—then they are already doing the most important work of preparing them for whatever comes next.

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