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# EDUCATION

*This whole idea of education is the root of what does or doesn't happen in our lives.*

– Focus Group Participant

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**N**ationwide and in Washington State, women and girls are making significant educational gains. With every generation, the percentage of women earning college degrees in the four-county region has increased. Among women, college enrollment and years of higher education are at their highest levels ever, and women in the region now complete more years of higher education than men.

Trends in primary and secondary schools are similar. In 4th, 7th, and 10th grades, a higher percentage of girls than boys are meeting the reading and writing standards on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL); in math and science, subjects where girls have typically lagged behind boys, the size of the gender gap on the WASL is negligible. High school girls in the four-county region have lower dropout rates and higher graduation rates than boys.

Despite these significant educational gains, challenges remain. In higher education, women continue to be overrepresented in academic fields associated with lower-paying jobs and remain underrepresented in those leading to higher-paying jobs. Girls are not developing the math and science skills critical to success in the 21st-century job market. While girls are doing as well as boys on the WASL math and science tests, significant proportions of both sexes are not meeting standards in these subjects. With the exception of Asian students, females of color have the lowest rates of secondary and post-secondary educational achievement and attainment of advanced degrees.

Community sources indicated that the cost of higher education, lack of financial assistance, and gender inequities in athletic scholarships create major barriers to women's and girls' ability to enter and graduate from college. Finally, high-quality early child care and education—so critical to a child's social and educational outcomes later in life—are becoming more difficult for families to afford.

## **ENROLLMENT AND ATTAINMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Nationally and locally, women are enrolling in and graduating from college at higher rates than ever before. Explanations of women's educational gains over the last several decades include decreases in overt gender discrimination in educational settings and increases in the perceived value of education for women.<sup>44</sup>

Over half of the students enrolled in Washington's four-year institutions (both public and private) and community and technical schools are female.<sup>45</sup> Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of young women (18 to 24) in Whatcom County, and about one-third in King (38 percent), Pierce (31 percent), and Snohomish (31 percent) counties are enrolled in college.<sup>46</sup> The higher percentage of 18- to 24-year-old females enrolled in college in Whatcom County may partially be explained by the fact that it has several public and private post-secondary institutions and is home to Western Washington University, which is also the largest employer in the area.<sup>47</sup>

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*The only way we're going to stay ahead  
and to meet the needs of business is to  
make sure that everyone has the skills  
they need to be a productive, contributing  
member of the workforce. [We need to  
take] a long-term view to develop the  
skills that lead to self sufficiency.*

– Community Source

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Furthermore, the percentage of women in the four-county region with at least a bachelor's degree has increased with almost every generation; twice as many of today's 25- to 34-year-old women have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to women age 65 and older. In King County, 52 percent of women (age 25 to 34) have a degree, followed by 36, 31, and 22 percent of women in Whatcom, Snohomish, and Pierce counties, respectively (Chart 9).<sup>48</sup> In each county, women outpace men in both higher educational enrollment and degree attainment.<sup>49</sup>

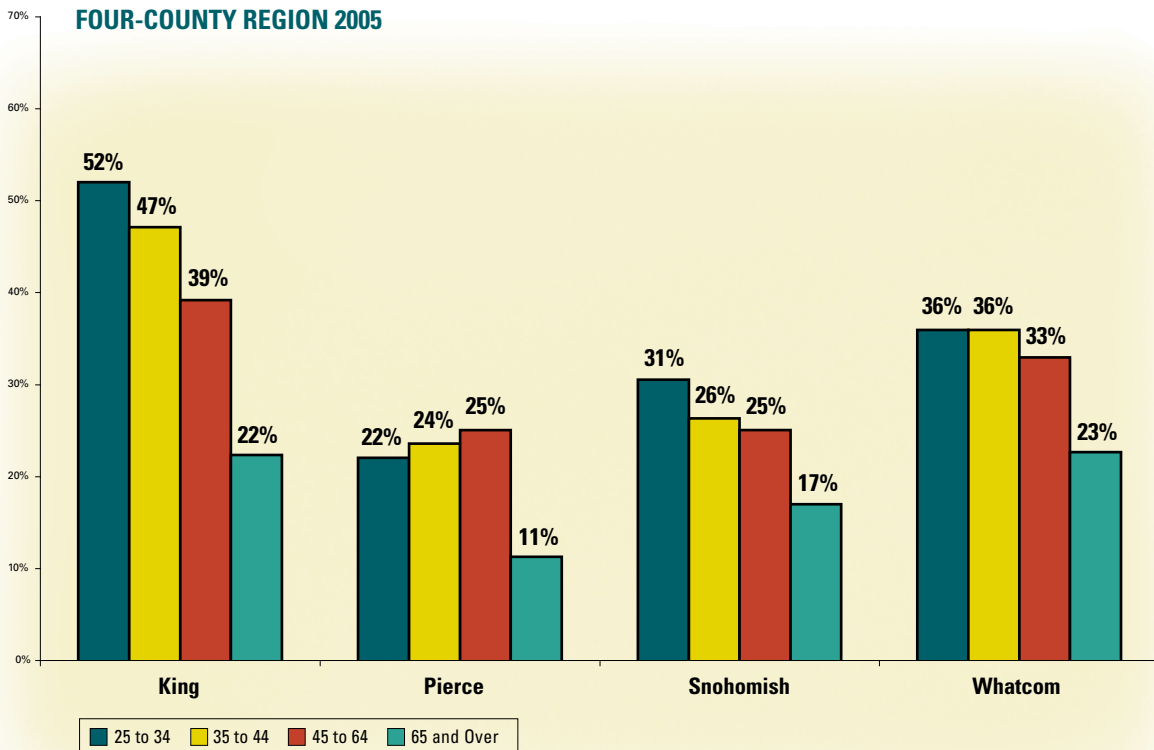
Consistent with general trends in education when comparing males and females, women of color attain higher levels of education than men of color.<sup>50</sup> Among females, however, significant racial and ethnic disparities in educational attainment still exist. In Washington, 41 percent of Asian women have a college degree compared to 29, 17, 12, and 10 percent of White, Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaskan Native women, respectively. Community sources reported that, particularly for low-income women and girls, major barriers to educational advancement include the cost of higher education, lack of adequate financial assistance, and gender inequities in athletic scholarships.

*The benefit [of public investments] isn't just for the person who gets the job; the benefit is for all of us. The benefit is you've got a person who might have been on welfare or in jail and who's now contributing to the workforce. It's an investment in human capital that's going to help you as a business person, as a state and country to have a stronger economy. From a taxpayer point of view, it makes sense.*

– Community Source

**CHART 9**

**PERCENT OF FEMALES WITH A BACHELOR'S DEGREE OR HIGHER BY AGE GROUP  
FOUR-COUNTY REGION 2005**



Source: American Community Survey 2005

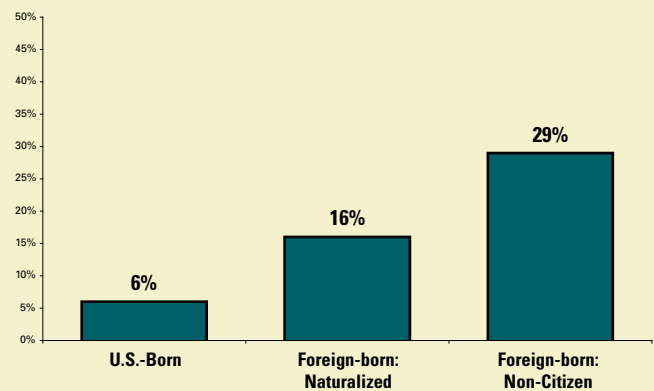
## EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE WOMEN AND GIRLS

Over the past 25 years, female immigrants in the U.S. have made impressive gains in education. Across all age groups and regions of origin, female immigrants are increasingly likely to attend high school and college.<sup>51</sup>

In Washington, higher educational attainment among foreign-born females is on par with that for women born in the U.S. More than one in four (28 percent) Washington women age 25 and older, regardless of nativity (U.S.-born or foreign-born) and citizenship status, has a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>52</sup> However, higher educational attainment likely varies depending on a woman's region of origin. Nationally, foreign-born individuals from South and East Asia, the Middle East, and South America are much more likely than individuals from Mexico and Central America to obtain a college degree. These differences can be attributed to length of time spent in the U.S., English proficiency, and cultural expectations that women and girls face in their own communities.<sup>53</sup>

Undocumented immigrants and refugees have limited opportunities for higher education, as they are generally excluded from social-service supports that could help them access and afford post-secondary education. Federal law prohibits undocumented immigrants from receiving federally funded financial aid, and most states do not let them pay in-state tuition rates. Washington State is an exception. Washington has the distinction of being the only state in the Pacific Northwest that allows undocumented immigrant students to qualify for in-state tuition. The qualification criteria are that they: (1) finish a full senior year of high school from a Washington State school or receive a diploma equivalent; (2) live in Washington for at least three years before graduating and continue residing in the state before enrolling in college; and, (3) sign an affidavit stating they will file for permanent residency as soon as they become eligible.<sup>54</sup>

**CHART 9A**  
**PERCENT OF FEMALES WITH LESS THAN A HIGH SCHOOL DEGREE BY NATIVITY AND CITIZENSHIP WASHINGTON STATE 2005**



Source: American Community Survey 2005 IPUMS 5% Sample

While foreign-born females are doing as well as U.S.-born females in higher education, they lag behind in graduating from high school. Citizenship status contributes strongly to this difference. Almost one-third of females (25 and older) who are not citizens do not have a high school diploma, in contrast to 16 percent of naturalized foreign-born female citizens and 6 percent of U.S.-born women (Chart 9A).

English proficiency influences whether a student will stay in school. Only 58 percent of students with limited English proficiency (LEP) graduate from high school in Washington compared to 70 percent for all students.<sup>55</sup>

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*For me, another piece about education is about your passions....I would like to go back to school because I don't feel like I'm living my passions at work....Besides earning more,... you can live out your dreams.*

– Focus Group Participant

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## ACADEMIC FIELDS OF STUDY

Since 1970, women have increased their representation in all academic disciplines, resulting in relatively equal distributions of men and women in many fields.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, across the nation women continue to be overrepresented in lower-paying fields such as education, psychology, and health, and remain underrepresented in the highest-paying fields, such as engineering, computer and information sciences, and the physical sciences.<sup>57</sup>

Similar patterns persist in Washington State. Overall, more women than men earn degrees from Washington’s public universities, but women lag behind in degrees awarded in the sciences—a critical sector of the regional economy. Table 5 shows the percentage of bachelor’s degrees awarded in different fields of study to female students at two of the major public institu-

tions in the four-county region: the University of Washington (UW) and Western Washington University (WWU).<sup>58</sup>

Women receive the majority of degrees in health services, public administration/social service, education, cultural/gender studies, and visual/performing arts. However, women are underrepresented in fields, such as computer science and engineering, which are typically associated with higher-paying occupations. For example, at the UW, less than one-quarter of computer science (23 percent) and math/statistics (24 percent) degrees are awarded to females. At WWU, a higher proportion of math/statistics degrees are awarded to women (39 percent) compared to UW, but women obtain only 4 percent of computer-science degrees.

**PERCENT OF BACHELOR’S DEGREES AWARDED TO FEMALE STUDENTS IN 2004-05 FOR SELECTED PROGRAM AREAS FROM TWO PUBLIC FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS**

**TABLE 5**

|  | Four-Year Institution         |                                    |
|--|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
|  | University of Washington<br>% | Western Washington University<br>% |
| All Bachelor’s Degrees Awarded to Female Students      | 53%                           | 59%                                |
| <b>PROGRAM AREA</b>                                    |                               |                                    |
| <b>Sciences</b>  |                               |                                    |
| Computer and information sciences and support services | 23                            | 4                                  |
| Engineering and engineering technology                 | 18                            | 6                                  |
| Mathematics and statistics                             | 24                            | 39                                 |
| Physical sciences                                      | 37                            | 43                                 |
| <b>Professional</b>                                    |                               |                                    |
| Architecture and related services                      | 57                            | *                                  |
| Communication, journalism, and related programs        | 68                            | 72                                 |
| Education  | 59                            | 80                                 |
| Health professions and related clinical sciences       | 80                            | 98                                 |
| Psychology   | 73                            | 71                                 |
| Public administration and social service professionals | 83                            | 85                                 |
| <b>Other</b>   |                               |                                    |
| Area, ethnic, cultural, and gender studies             | 68                            | 52                                 |
| Business, management, marketing, and related services  | 43                            | 38                                 |
| Family and consumer sciences/human sciences            | *                             | 90                                 |
| Foreign languages, literatures, and linguistics        | 64                            | 75                                 |
| History  | 43                            | 44                                 |
| Parks, recreation, leisure, and fitness studies        | *                             | 60                                 |
| Philosophy and religious studies                       | 42                            | 25                                 |
| Security and protective services                       | 59                            | *                                  |
| Social Sciences  | 52                            | 52                                 |
| Visual and performing arts                             | 70                            | 58                                 |

Source: Adapted from 2004-2005 IPEDS data found in Table 2 of “Gender Equity in Higher Education” Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board (December 2006). An asterisk (\*) indicates that the institution does not award degrees in this program area.

## EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL

### Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL)

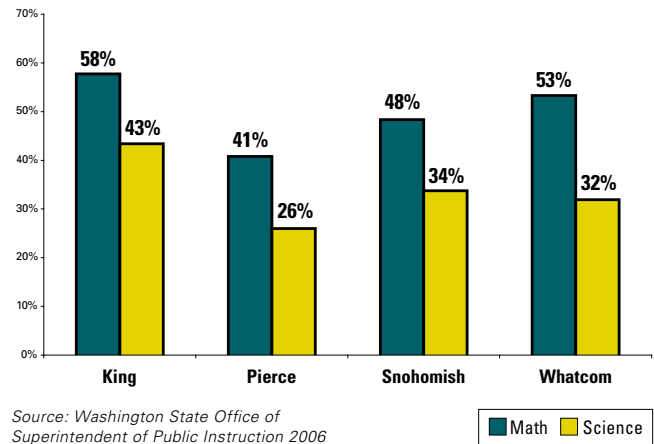
The WASL measures performance in four subject areas: reading, writing, math, and science. Starting in 2013, 10th-grade students who do not meet standards in any subject will not be eligible to graduate from high school.

The good news is that well over three-quarters (80 to 88 percent) of 10th-grade females in each of the four counties meet WASL standards in reading and writing. The percentage meeting math and science standards, however, is significantly lower. Only 58, 53, 48, and 41 percent of females in King, Whatcom, Snohomish, and Pierce counties, respectively, meet math standards (Chart 10). Even fewer perform at criterion level in science—43 percent in King County, about one-third in Snohomish (34 percent) and Whatcom (32 percent) counties, and one-quarter in Pierce County (26 percent).

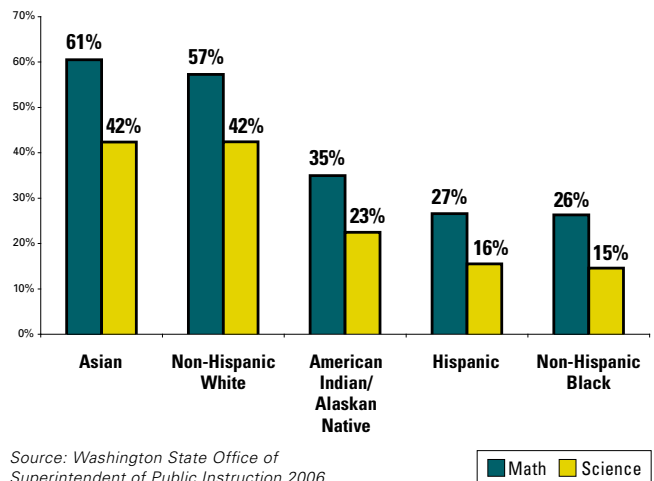
WASL performance differs somewhat by sex, with females typically outpacing males in reading and writing. While national data indicate that the gap in math and science performance between girls and boys remains (but is narrowing), the gender gap in math and science is negligible in Washington and the four-county region.<sup>59</sup> Racial and ethnic disparities are more striking than gender differences, however, and persist in all WASL subjects. Racial/ethnic disparities in math and science are of particular concern because these skills are so highly valued in the workplace.

In Washington, 61 percent of Asian and 57 percent of White females meet WASL math standards, compared to just 35, 27, and 26 percent of American Indian/Alaskan Native, Hispanic, and Black females, respectively (Chart 11). In science, about twice as many Asian and White females meet WASL standards than females in other racial and ethnic groups, although fewer than half of females overall meet the standards. The implications of the racial/ethnic gap in education are devastating since higher levels of educational achievement and attainment are associated with many long-term positive outcomes for individuals and society.

**CHART 10**  
PERCENT OF 10TH-GRADE FEMALES MEETING MATH AND SCIENCE WASL STANDARDS  
FOUR-COUNTY REGION 2005-2006



**CHART 11**  
PERCENT OF 10TH-GRADE FEMALES MEETING MATH AND SCIENCE WASL STANDARDS BY RACE/ETHNICITY  
WASHINGTON STATE 2005-2006



## FEMALE HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT RATES

The negative consequences of dropping out of high school are severe. Over their working lives, students who drop out earn less than graduates and are more likely to experience unemployment, effects that are largely due to an increasingly skilled labor force.<sup>60</sup> Nationally and in Washington State, girls are less likely than boys to drop out of public high schools.<sup>61</sup> Figures in the four-county region are similar, but the differences between male and female dropout rates are small. In King County, for example, 3 percent of females did not graduate during the 2004-2005 academic year compared to 5 percent of males. Both Pierce and Snohomish counties had dropout rates of 5 and 6 percent for females and males, respectively. In Whatcom County, 6 percent of both sexes dropped out of high school.<sup>62</sup>

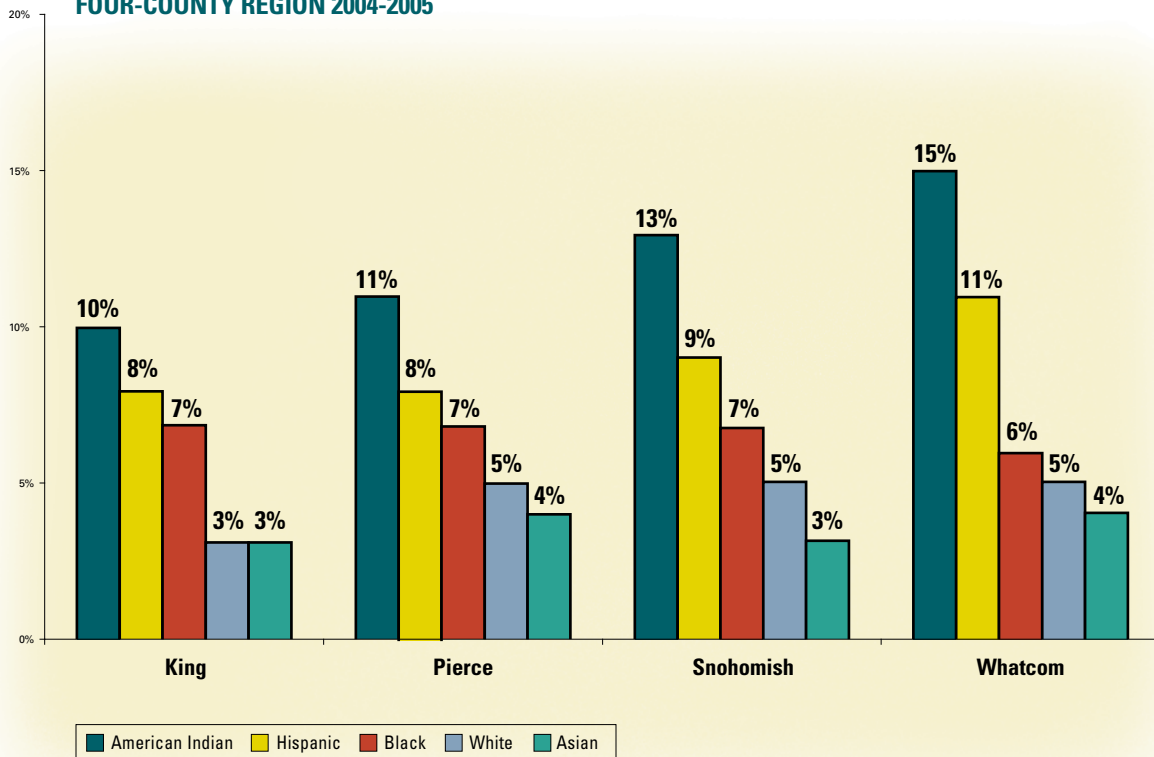
Several factors may contribute to the typical difference between male and female dropout rates.<sup>63</sup> Nationally, female students are less likely than their male counterparts to engage in violent behavior and substance use,<sup>64</sup> less likely to be diagnosed with learning disabilities,<sup>65</sup> and more likely to plan on attending college.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, with the exception of athletics, girls

are also more likely than boys to participate in extracurricular activities,<sup>67</sup> which are associated with higher academic achievement and educational expectations.<sup>68</sup>

Of greater concern than gender differences are dropout rates by race and ethnicity. In each of the four counties, American Indian, Hispanic, and Black students—both male and female—have higher dropout rates than White and Asian students (Chart 12).

Higher dropout rates among American Indian/Alaskan Native, Hispanic, and Black female high school students may be partially explained by the higher rates of teenage pregnancy in these racial/ethnic groups. Teen pregnancy rates have decreased substantially in Washington for several decades, but remain relatively high among these three racial/ethnic groups.<sup>69</sup> Nationally, only 71 percent of teenage mothers graduate from high school compared to 95 percent of those without children; and just 2 percent of teenage females with children graduate from college compared to 44 percent of those without.<sup>70</sup>

**CHART 12**  
**HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT RATES BY RACE/ETHNICITY**  
**FOUR-COUNTY REGION 2004-2005**



Source: Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction 2004-2005 and Dropout Statistics

## IMPORTANCE OF EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Children’s success in school and life is related to the quality of learning experiences in their first five years, before they enter kindergarten. Low-income children who participate in high-quality child care benefit in both the short and long terms. Short-term outcomes include the development of greater cognitive, social, and emotional skills.<sup>71</sup> Long-term benefits include higher lifetime earnings, greater employment stability and labor market success, higher educational attainment, greater family stability, and dramatically reduced involvement in delinquency and crime.<sup>72</sup> Positive outcomes for the child translate into benefits for society as a whole; estimates suggest that for every dollar invested in a quality early care and education (ECE) program, \$17 is returned to society.<sup>73</sup>

Kindergarten teachers in Washington State report that fewer than half of incoming students are adequately prepared for kindergarten, suggesting a lack of quality in early child care settings.<sup>74</sup> Recruiting and retaining high-quality early care and education providers, therefore, are key elements to assuring quality early learning and school readiness for children.

Low wages for child care providers—the majority of whom are female—result in high occupational turnover. Turnover affects the quality of care, the stability of the children’s relationships with caregivers, and, ultimately, children’s developmental outcomes. Most early care and education providers do not have bachelor’s degrees, but providers with equivalent education as K-12 public school teachers still earn significantly less than their K-12 counterparts.<sup>75</sup> Statewide, for example, kindergarten

**AVERAGE ANNUAL SALARIES OF CHILD CARE PROVIDERS  
FOUR-COUNTY REGION 2004**

**TABLE 6**

| Region    | Teaching Position                  |                              |                             |                          |
|-----------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
|           | Public School Kindergarten Teacher | Director – Child Care Center | Teacher – Child Care Center | Family Child Care Center |
| King      | \$40,330                           | \$32,676                     | \$23,338                    | \$39,351                 |
| Pierce    | \$40,330                           | \$26,364                     | \$19,302                    | \$27,106                 |
| Snohomish | \$40,330                           | \$27,948                     | \$20,717                    | \$30,734                 |
| Whatcom   | \$40,330                           | \$27,948                     | \$20,717                    | \$30,734                 |

*Source: Washington State Resource & Referral Network 2005*

teachers make 44 percent more than child-care-center directors and 93 percent more than child-care-center teachers. Figures in the four-county region are consistent with state trends. The wage disparities between kindergarten teachers and child care workers are largest in Pierce County (Table 6).<sup>76</sup>

Ensuring that all families have access to affordable, high-quality child care is not only important for working families—especially single parents—but also for children’s future social, economic, educational, and health outcomes. The benefits are especially pronounced for low-income families. Research has shown significant returns on investment for high-quality early care and education programs for low-income children, who are most at risk for lack of school readiness.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, improving quality of child care and increasing access and affordability for families are wise investments for children, families, and society as a whole.

*If we say we value families, regardless of configuration,  
we should make it, as a society,  
easier for parents to care [for their families].*

– Community Source

## MOVING FORWARD

In this chapter we highlighted the substantial gains women and girls have made in education. In spite of these gains, access to education remains a challenge for women and girls, especially those who are low-income, women and girls of color, immigrants, and refugees. In addition, women and girls are not entering or performing well in academic fields associated with higher-paying jobs. The quantitative data, plus comments from community sources, suggest the following steps can improve educational opportunities for women and girls:

### Program and Service Improvements

- **Expand vocational internships and trade opportunities** for women and girls to improve their access to higher-paying jobs. Local universities, community colleges, and employers can play a critical role in developing these opportunities.
- **Assure affordable and culturally/linguistically appropriate early care and education** for all children.
- **Remove barriers to educational attainment for immigrant and refugee women** and provide supports that will help them access and succeed in the educational system.
- **Help low-income women access and complete higher education** by offering greater financial support, transportation assistance, child care, academic guidance, and comprehensive services.
- **Provide incentives, tutoring, guidance, and scholarships to help move more women and girls into high-paying fields** such as computer science, engineering, and math.
- **Provide financial and social supports to young mothers pursuing education.**
- **Provide career counseling and guidance** for immigrant and refugee students during and after high school graduation, including advisors in post-secondary institutions who specialize in working with the unique needs of immigrant and refugee students.
- **Provide child care for immigrant and refugee women** participating in English language classes, job-training programs, and education. Program planning should be sensitive to both the child care needs and scheduling constraints experienced by immigrant and refugee women.

### Public Policy Considerations

- **Support initiatives to improve the quality of child care** (such as Quality Rating and Improvement Systems) and increase compensation of child care workers.
- **Reform the tax structure** in Washington State so that education—from preschool through college—has adequate and dependable long-term funding.
- **Invest in math and science education** in primary and middle schools and offer mentoring programs for girls to encourage their study in these disciplines.
- **Identify and implement effective school reforms that address the racial achievement gap in education.**

### Strategies for Social Change

- **Create public-awareness campaigns and advocacy materials** about the benefits of investing in early child care and education programs for children.
- **Advocate for greater financing for education at all levels**, particularly to improve access and support educational attainment for women and girls of color, those with low incomes, and immigrants and refugees.

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*The most successful people  
that I know have had  
someone believe in them.  
You have to get kids early.*

– Focus Group Participant

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