

BRINGING THE ‘HELP ME GROW’ FRAMEWORK TO WHATCOM COUNTY

Our driving question

How can we leverage our community resources, expertise, and partnerships so that all families with young children in Whatcom County receive the resources they need when, where, and how they need them right from the start?

Our Belief: All children deserve to grow up healthy

Research is clear that the first five years of a child’s life are critical to their development and help to build a foundation for their future success. Children’s brains develop connections faster in those first five years than at any other time. This is when the foundations for learning, health and behavior are established. That is why it is essential to connect families with the services, opportunities and resources that will support their success and help their growing children to thrive, beginning at the prenatal stage.

Our Challenge: Whatcom County families with young children need more support

Looking at the research from the [WELA Family Needs survey](#) and reviewing the [input that we gathered from School-based FRC Staff](#), we know that families in Whatcom County are experiencing inequitable and significant challenges with housing, mental health, transportation, childcare and access to healthy food. In many cases, families with school-age children are being connected with the resources they need to address many of these challenges, and other challenges they face. Unfortunately for families prenatal to age 5 there is a gap in support and they are not being connected with resources as successfully. Our community must address this gap to ensure that parents and families are connected with the services and support that they need during this vitally important stage of development.

Our Strategy: Make it easier for families to access resources with the Help Me Grow framework

Across the nation, Help Me Grow offers families seamless access to community services and support so they can easily connect to the resources they need, when they need them. The [Help Me Grow Washington](#) network represents a growing, powerful coalition of communities and individuals invested in building an organized system of community resources to help children grow up healthy. A successful Help Me Grow system requires communities to work collaboratively, identify resources and think creatively about how to make the most of strengths and opportunities.

Our community is using the Help Me Grow framework to help ensure families are receiving the support they need when, where and how they need it. The goal for this project was to learn more about the work of the school-based family resource centers and determine where additional funding can have the greatest impact for families. The research looked at why the FRC model was so effective, and how it might be leveraged to serve more families in our community - including families with children under 6 who aren’t yet enrolled in school.

WHAT, WHEN & HOW FAMILIES WOULD LIKE TO ACCESS RESOURCES

WHEN: Families tell us that we must reach families earlier as parents of very young children struggle to access resources. Building relationships and trust with families beginning prenatally will ensure that families have the ongoing support they need as their children grow.

WHERE: Families shared that they need resources to be convenient, safe, and accessible. Ideally, some place close to their homes. Many families struggle with transportation and logistical challenges. The recent parent survey conducted by the Whatcom Early Learning Alliance found that logistical barriers prevented 30% of families from accessing services. We must find ways to bring more services and support to the neighborhoods and communities with the greatest need.

HOW: Families are looking for culturally responsive, welcoming, flexible, relationship-centered spaces to access services.

THE SPECIAL ROLE OF SCHOOL-BASED FAMILY RESOURCE CENTERS

To learn more about how families are supported within the school system, we visited Family Resource Coordinators and Liaisons in school districts across Whatcom County. At each site, we interviewed a staff member and toured the site. We saw the Family Resource Centers in Blaine, Lynden, Meridian, and Bellingham (Carl Cozier Elementary and Shuksan Middle School locations). We also met with the Coordinators and Liaisons who work on-site at schools or at the District Office in the Mount Baker School District, Ferndale School District, and Nooksack Valley School District. While each district has a unique approach to servicing families (see Appendix A for more details about each district), each FRC team brings similar approaches to their work with families.

KEY FINDINGS



School-based Family Resource Coordinators and Family Liaisons are a unique and effective approach to supporting families in Whatcom County.

They establish long-term relationships with families

Because children are in school for multiple years, the Coordinators and Liaisons can build long-term relationships with families. Working with families over multiple years allows Coordinators and Liaisons to gain a deep understanding of family needs, and they are able to invest time to build trust and connection with families.

They address obstacles quickly and efficiently

They help families navigate the social services system much more quickly than they can on their own due to the deep experience the Coordinators and Liaisons have accessing services, and the relationships they have built with many different social services and organizations. Due to this deep expertise, they can ensure that families are connected with the appropriate community partner to

meet their specific needs quickly. This responsiveness often helps families avoid having a small problem – such as a dead car battery – turn into a big problem, such as a parent losing their job because the car won't start.

The ability to respond quickly and creatively to the challenges that families face was amplified by a recent investment from a local philanthropic foundation. During the pandemic, the Mount Baker Foundation chose to grant \$20,000 to the Family Resource program in each school district. These unrestricted funds were intended to help families through the challenges of the pandemic, and the Coordinators and Liaisons were able to put these dollars to work to support and stabilize families. Having access to this kind of flexible and responsive funding was unprecedented for nearly all of the FRCs and many of them referred to this funding as a “game-changer”. With this funding, they helped families face unexpected expenses such as helping to fix water pipes that had frozen, assisting a family with purchasing extra wood to heat their home, paying for short-term motel stays to keep families housed, and so many other urgent needs. Of course, this funding also helped families access food and other basic needs. Looking at the impact of this grant, it is clear that access to flexible and responsive funding helps FRCs to be even more effective as they help families navigate challenges.

They are convenient and accessible

Many Coordinators and Liaisons are located within school buildings. Those that are located at the District Offices will often work out of different schools and will also visit families at their homes to provide resources and have meetings. Transportation can be a significant barrier for families, so having access to resources that are nearby is an advantage. [This short video shares more detail about the locations of specific FRCs.](#)

They are family-centered

They are family-centered and focus on ensuring that families feel welcome and respected. They are sensitive to different cultures and offer services in multiple languages so that families feel respected and comfortable. They will often visit families at their homes to deliver supplies or to meet in person. Simply put, they make it easy for families to ask for the support that they need.

Their knowledge of their community is deep and specific

Because they are dispersed throughout Whatcom County, they have deep knowledge and connection to the specific challenges that families face in their community. They also have deep knowledge of the resources and services that are convenient and accessible for families. The FRCs and Liaisons work very closely with local service clubs, churches, nonprofit organizations and corporate partners to meet the individual needs of each family, whether they need beds, medical care, clothing, furniture or other services.

They have a strong network of support county-wide

All of the Family Resource Coordinators and Liaisons in Whatcom County meet monthly to build connections, share resources and learn together through their ***Whatcom County Schools Homeless Consortium***. The relationships that have been built through this group also help Coordinators and Liaisons work together when families move from one school district to another, providing a warm hand-off and support for families. Changing school districts is a common

occurrence for vulnerable children, especially those who are housing insecure. The FRCs have built a network of support for each other and for families across our community.



The Family Resource Center model is gaining attention and potential funding opportunities at the Federal, State and Local levels.

Family Resource Centers are gaining attention across the US

Participation in the National Family Support Network is growing rapidly. Founded in 2011, the National Family Support Network (NFSN) is a membership-based organization comprised of state Networks of two or more Family Resource Centers, working together within a collective impact framework to ensure coordinated quality support for families. The mission of the National Family Support Network -www.nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org – is to promote positive outcomes for all children, families, and communities by leveraging the collective impact of state networks and championing quality family support and strengthening practices and policies. As the United States' coordinating body for Family Resource Center Networks, the NFSN currently has **39 member networks**, comprised of more than 3,000 Family Support and Strengthening organizations, representing the great geographical and demographic diversity of the nation. NFSN provides Standards Certification training for programs across the country - <https://www.nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org/standards-training>.

NFSN has collected comprehensive data on the impact and outcomes of Family Resource Centers across the US. Their findings show that neighborhoods with Family Support Centers had a 26% lower rate of child abuse and neglect investigations than similar neighborhoods without them. Since Teller County, Colorado moved to a differential response model in 2016 that utilizes a Family Resource Center, the child abuse rate has reduced by 57%.

An increased focus on FRCs in Washington State

In early 2021, the Washington state legislature passed House Bill 1237 to provide a common definition for family resource centers across Washington state to establish a core set of principles for existing and newly forming family resource centers. This is the definition they approved:

WA legislature HB 1237: Definition of a Family Resource Center

"Family resource center" means a unified single point of entry where families, individuals, children, and youth in communities can obtain information, an assessment of needs, referral to, or direct delivery of family services in a manner that is welcoming and strengths-based.

In Washington, several school districts have invested deeply in their Family Resource Center work. We interviewed staff from both Bethel School District and Vancouver Public Schools to learn more about their models (See Addendum B).

Both the [Department of Children, Youth & Families](#) and the Department of Commerce in Washington state are offering funding to support Family Resource Centers across the state, and the DCYF also issued a report in August 2021, entitled [Washington State Family Resource Center Landscape Study](#). A summary of that report can be found in Addendum C.

Support for FRCs in Whatcom County is strong and growing

Locally, school-based FRCs have received significant investments from Mount Baker Foundation, and new FRCs are opening in Bellingham, Meridian Schools, and there is a strong potential for two new FRCs to open in Nooksack Valley School District – one at Everson Elementary, and one at Sumas Elementary.

OPPORTUNITIES & NEXT STEPS

Whatcom County is fortunate to have a strong and healthy network of school-based Family Resource Coordinators, Family Liaisons and several School-based Family Resource Centers that provide support to families by providing access to food, clothing, hygiene supplies and other basic needs, while also helping families navigate around the challenges that arise.

Around the state of Washington – and throughout the US - we find that some communities have invested deeply into the school-based FRC model, and those investments appear to be paying off. Extending the FRC impact to include children under five will only increase the impact of this system.

Expand and leverage the FRC Model to include families prenatal to 5

We have a strong system of Family Support Services in place across all Whatcom County school districts. An opportunity for us is to deepen the coordination and strengthen the pathways between the Early Learning Coordinators and Family Resource Coordinators. Developing a plan to extend FRC services to ALL families in our community would require dedicated leadership and collaboration between FRC staff and ELC within and across districts.

Questions to explore include:

- What are the potential opportunities to leverage the school-based FRC model to support families before they enter school?
- How might we invite leaders at each school district to build on the momentum of the Consortium to help families access the resources they need to thrive right from the start?
- Where are the opportunities to deepen the connections between Early Learning staff and the FRCs and Liaisons, and how can we help to support those connections?
- How can a district leverage expanded age resource centers in service of their state-mandated "child-find" efforts?
- How can we fund additional staffing capacity for Family Resource Coordinators and Early Learning Coordinators as they partner in this work?

Advocate for school-based FRCs and highlight their impactful work

To advocate for FRCs and highlight the impact of their relationship-based approach, it will be important to share stories of the many ways that Family Resource Coordinators and Family Liaisons help families navigate obstacles and find a way to keep families housed, fed, and to provide stability for their children.

Questions to explore include:

- Who are the key audiences that influence the funding and support for school-based FRCs?
- How can we better highlight the life-changing work that is happening to build support as we strengthen this system?

Explore and advocate for additional funding to support the FRC work

Many communities have invested in school-based Family Resource Centers as a best practice for supporting families and students. However, expanding and deepening the scope of the FRCs will require additional investments with possibilities for braided support from Federal and State funding, private fundraising, and corporate support. We have an opportunity to leverage state-wide funding with the upcoming Commerce Department grants. As well as build upon our local infrastructure with the partnership with the Whatcom Homeless Consortium.

Questions to answer include:

- Where are the potential funding streams and how can we help to leverage them and weave them together for greatest impact for families?
- Are there complimentary funding streams that are focused on supporting families prenatal to 5?

This project was launched to answer this driving question: *How can we leverage the Help Me Grow Framework and our community resources, expertise, and partnerships so that families with young children in Whatcom County receive the resources they need when, where and how they need them?* Our research looked at the system of supports available to families in our community and specifically how we could address the gap in support that many families prenatal to age 5 are facing. A successful Help Me Grow system requires communities to work collaboratively, identify resources and think creatively about how to make the most of strengths and opportunities.

The result of this research has shown that School-based Family Resource Centers are a unique and effective community asset for families and there are opportunities in Whatcom County to expand the impact of FRCs to reach children before they enter the school system with additional funding, advocacy, and collaboration

ADDENDUMS

Addendum A: School Districts in Whatcom County have diverse needs and each district supports families in unique ways. To provide some context, here is a short summary of each school district in Whatcom County and the systems they have in place to support families

Ferndale School District contains 14 schools and **4,349 students**. Currently 51.5% of students who attend Ferndale School District are eligible for Free & Reduced Lunch.

- **Birth to 5 population:** Within the school district there are 1,961 kids under 5, with 427 births in 2018.

Family Support Services in Ferndale

Ferndale School District does not have a physical location for families to access supplies. Kim Bunch works out of the district office where she collaborates with teachers, counselors and other staff throughout the district to meet student and family needs. She often delivers supplies such as food, shoes and hygiene supplied to different school buildings and coordinates with the building staff to connect students and families with the supplies they need. Ferndale School District also has a close relationship with the [Ferndale Community Services](#) center, located in downtown Ferndale. Kim and other district staff will often refer families to FCS to connect them with needed clothing, food, and other essentials. Ferndale School District also works closely with FCS to purchase specific items that a family may need through a special partnership that they have established.

Lynden School District contains 5 schools and has 3000 students enrolled. Currently, 35.2% of the students who attend Lynden School District are eligible for Free & Reduced Lunch.

- **Birth to 5 Population:** Within the school district there are 1,392 kids under 5, with 279 births in 2018.

Family Support Services in Lynden Schools

Lynden Schools have a centralized Family Resource Center that is housed in a former Middle School building along with a preschool and the District Offices. They are right in central Lynden and are easy to access with all signage in both English and Spanish as well as all 4 staff members at the FRC speaking both English and Spanish. The Lynden FRC offers clothing, bedding, housewares, hygiene supplies and furniture for families. They partner closely with local service clubs to deliver furniture to families. The Lynden FRC is truly a one stop shop for families to access basic needs and to work directly with the FRC staff to connect with services. The Lynden FRC also has a private room where outside service providers could meet with families, although that hasn't been happening. The FRC also offers a computer for families to use to connect with services.

Bellingham School District contains 22 schools and approximately 12,000 students. Currently, 32.8% of the students who attend Bellingham School District are eligible for Free & Reduced Lunch.

- **Birth to 5 Population:** Within the school district boundaries there were 2,025 kids under 5, with 856 births in 2018.

Family Support Services in Bellingham Schools

Bellingham Schools offers two Family Resource Centers. One of the FRCs is at Shuksan Middle School and the other FRC is at Carl Cozier Elementary. Both sites offer hygiene supplies and some other basic supplies. The SMS site also offers beds, bedding, and some clothing. The Carl Cozier FRC is unique in that they have a housing specialist from the Opportunity Council who works out of their office multiple days per week. This is a convenient service for families and it also helpful for the Coordinators and Family Liaisons when they are supporting families with housing needs. The Bellingham Schools Family Resource Coordinators and Family Liaisons often visit families at their homes, and their goal is to schedule a home visit with every new immigrant family who moves into the district. They find that the home visits are very helpful to assess all of the different needs that families may have. The Family Engagement team at Bellingham Schools is led by Isabel Meaker. [Isabel leads a team of 12 Coordinators and Liaisons.](#)

Nooksack Valley School District contains 5 schools and has approximately 1900 students enrolled. Currently, 58.5% of the students who attend Nooksack Valley Schools are eligible for Free & Reduced Lunch.

- **Birth to 5 Population:** Within the school district they have 873 kids under 5, with 119 births in 2018.

Family Support Services in Nooksack Valley Schools

Nooksack Valley School District offers supports to families through a Family Resource Coordinator who works out of the District Office, and a Migrant Family Liaison who works primarily out of Everson Elementary. There are a large number of families with needs in the Nooksack Valley School District, and transportation is a significant obstacle for many families. For these reasons, the Nooksack Valley School District is exploring the possibility of opening 2 Family Resource Centers in the district – one located at Everson Elementary, and one located at Sumas Elementary. District leadership supports this concept, and they are actively seeking funding opportunities to build out and staff these facilities.

Meridian School District contains 5 schools and 1,836 students enrolled. 31.5% of the students who attend Meridian Schools are eligible for Free & Reduced Lunch.

- **Birth to 5 Population:** Within the school district boundaries they have 603 kids under 5, with 119 births in 2018.

Family Support Services in Meridian Schools

Meridian School District serves families with the support of a Family Resource Coordinator who works closely with a Cultural Liaison. Meridian opened up a new Family Resource Center complex with 3 new portable buildings on the campus of Irene Reither Elementary School in May of 2022. The vision for these 3 buildings is that one of them will serve as a classroom and meeting space for parents, one will provide space for clothing, food and other basic needs for families, and the third space will be the office for the Family Resource Coordinator and the Cultural Liaison. Meridian Schools has a close connection with the Laurel Church, who has supported the schools with a clothing bank and other donations for many years.

Mount Baker School District contains 7 schools and 1,729 students. 66.5% of the students who attend Mount Baker Schools are eligible for Free & Reduced Lunch.

- **Birth to 5 Population:** Within the school district boundaries they have 843 kids under 5, with 166 births in 2018.

Family Support Services in Mount Baker Schools

Mount Baker School District currently has four Family Resource Coordinators working out of Kendall Elementary, Harmony Elementary, Mount Baker Junior High and Mount Baker Senior High. Because they have placed Coordinators at each of the schools, they do not have a Family Resource Center space for families to access clothing, food and other basic needs. Instead they often arrange to meet families' needs and arrange to deliver the items via a home visit, or the family picks up the items at one of the schools. The Mount Baker School District covers a large geographic area, and transportation is a significant barrier for many families. The School District partners closely with the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center (EWRRRC) and with the Foothills Food Bank to serve families in the region. Lack of accessible Medical Care is an ongoing challenge for families in this district.

Blaine School District has 5 schools and 2,000 students enrolled. 51.5% of the students who attend Blaine Schools are eligible for Free & Reduced Lunch.

- **Birth to 5 Population:** Within the school district boundaries they have 945 kids under 5, with 153 births in 2018.

Family Support Services in Blaine Schools

Blaine School District has a Family Resource Center and a Family Resource Coordinator located on their main school campus, where the Elementary, Middle and High School buildings are all located. The Blaine Family Resource Coordinator also works very closely with the [Community Assistance Program \(CAP\)](#), which is a volunteer-run resource center for the Blaine & Birch Bay communities. The Blaine Family Resource Center offers clothing, housewares, hygiene items, and some basic food items as well as space for families to use computers. The Family Resource Coordinator also works closely with several service clubs and community organizations to meet needs of families. Lack of affordable housing and lack of social services in Blaine are two big challenges that families face in the Blaine School District.

Common Obstacles for School-based FRCs

Red tape/bureaucracy within school districts can make it difficult for Family Resource Coordinators and Liaisons to access funds and to be responsive to emerging and urgent family needs.

**Idea – can we create an organization to raise funds to support the work of Family Recourse Coordinators across the county (and disperse them to each school-based on a formula that factors in school district size, the percentage of multi-language students; and percentage of students who receive free & reduced lunch)?*

Language & Cultural Barriers can make communication difficult and time-consuming.

**Idea – could each district pay a stipend to a bilingual or multilingual parent to help ease communication between Family Resource Center staff and families?*

Bellingham– centered human services, Mental Health care and Medical care make it difficult for families in outlying areas to access the help they need when they need it. Blaine, Mount Baker Schools and Nooksack Valley Schools are hit particularly hard with this challenge.

**Idea – can we explore school-based health centers that operate on site at schools, and are potentially integrated into the Family Resource Center services?*

Repetitive Meetings for Families create a system that is not efficient for families and is especially challenging for families who struggle with transportation issues.

**Idea – can we schedule social service organizations to visit school-based Family Resource Centers weekly, so that families don't face the travel challenges, and also have access to their trusted allies within the school to help them with their meetings.*

Addendum B: Research on Promising Programs in Washington State

Vancouver Public Schools Family Community Resource Centers (FCRCs)

In 2008, Vancouver (WA) Public Schools made family-community resource centers a districtwide program. They currently offer 22 centers; 14 are based in elementary schools, 4 in middle schools, 2 in high schools and they offer 2 mobile FRCs. Vancouver School District contains 41 schools and 21,897 students. The district's minority enrollment is 40%.

Resources for students include school supplies, health services, dental care, clothing, food, and programs to keep homeless kids in their classrooms. Resources at the family level include emergency housing, job assistance, early childhood education, family activity nights and GED preparation.

Mobile FRCs Serve Families Across the District

Mobile coordinators are only focused on basic needs. Inside they have custom shelving for food, coats, hygiene supplies. The district operates a warehouse for them to "shop" for the supplies they need for their vans. They are available via cell and school staff will call them to set up special appointments and to help address emergent needs. The FRCs don't need any special licenses to drive the van. They started with 1 van, and then they added a 2nd van as the program was so successful. One of the mobile FRCs is a 12-month position so that they can continue to serve families over the summer.

Staffing & Funding Structure

The VPS FCRC program is staffed by an administrative staff of 5 who support the work of 24 full time Family Resource Coordinators including 2 mobile FRCs who work across the district out of specially designed Sprinter vans. The VPS Foundation is deeply connected to the FCRC program and raises more than \$1 million annually to support their work.

The FRC staff positions are paid out of basic ed. Each school has a budget for basic needs, and the Family Resource Coordinator manages the budget for their school.. All of the basic needs supplies -

food, clothing, shoes, etc. - are funded through the VPS Foundation. Businesses also give directly to the schools to be used for basic needs and enrichment.

Partnerships are Essential to the FRC Program

Columbia sportswear, lots of business support. The foundation. Faith-based organizations. Mainly Council for the Homeless which includes SHARE, which is where they get their food backpack program. Frito Lay is a donor for snacks for the schools. Department of Health partnership. ESD 112 is key. Enrichment Engagement - girls inc, boys and girls club - they have 2 sites that are on site at schools.

Internal partnerships within the district are key to their success as each school has different needs and priorities and the FRCs work with the staff at each school to design the support services they need.

[Click here for contact information for the VPS Family Community Resource Center team.](#)

Bethel School District Community Connections program

The Bethel School district has a unique partnership with a nonprofit organization called [Bethel Family Services](#) to offer a Family Resource Center on the campus of Challenger High School. This collaboration also includes funding from the Tacoma Pierce County Health Department as a part of their [Family Support Partnership](#) program.

Bethel Schools also offer a mobile outreach options for families called the Bethel Outreach Bus or BOB.

[Bethel Outreach Bus \(BOB\)](#) visits neighborhoods and small communities around the Bethel School District offering access to resources such as school, health, social and other outreach services and resources. Staff is available to assist families with access to WIC, DSHS services and several other resources requiring internet access. BOB also offers bread donated by Franz Bakery, food items and school supplies such as backpacks, clothes and books (items offered depend on season and availability). BOB offers children's activities, games, arts and crafts and other learning opportunities during visits.

Addendum C: DCYF Landscape Report

[DCYF FRC Landscape Report](#)

[FRC Landscape Study Summary of research and insights for Whatcom County](#)

Addendum D: Attachments & Links to Research

[Whatcom County School Leadership Summary](#)

[Washington House Bill 1237 \(defining FRCs\)](#)

Report submitted by Rachel Myers, RM + Co

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[Whatcom County Family Support System Jamboard](#)

[Link to Research Update slide deck from April 2022](#)