



**SMART**  
School Mental Health Assessment  
Research & Training Center

UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON  
PSYCHIATRY & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES  
School of Medicine

## **UW SMART Center 2026 Legislative Priority Statement**

**University of Washington School Mental Health Assessment, Research, and Training (SMART) Center**

Despite being one of the wealthiest states in the nation, Washington ranks 48th for youth mental health access, leaving tens of thousands of young people struggling without adequate care when they need it most. School mental health programming has been shown to improve access to care, reduce inequities, prevent mental health problems from emerging in the first place, and promote academic success.

Thus, in past years the SMART Center has recommended a consistent set of legislative and funding priorities related to scaling effective school behavioral health statewide. Such priorities include investing in proven strategies and programs, providing training and technical assistance on effective school mental health to schools and districts, and supporting the school-based behavioral health workforce.

Despite these priorities being aligned with those of the Office of the Washington State auditor, Washington State School Behavioral Health and Suicide Prevention Subcommittee, the League of Education Voters, and many other entities, these priorities have not yet been acted upon.

**Now a new roadmap for investing in our children and youth's well-being has arrived.**

Released in November 2025, *Washington Thriving Strategic Plan: A Roadmap to Well-Being for Every Child, Youth and Young Adult* is a comprehensive and ambitious plan for improving behavioral health coordination, access, and resources in our state.

Requested by the Legislature, and the result of years of effort, this plan provides direction for investing in evidence-based strategies, including providing K-12 schools with tools, resources and guidance to support student wellness; creating a system of care infrastructure; and expanding treatment options to serve Washingtonians equitably.

**With the advent of this Plan, the SMART Center's priorities for the 2026 short legislative session are simple: that the Washington State Legislature adopt and fully resource the *Washington Thriving* plan to ensure it comes to fruition.**

Within the Washington Thriving report, several action steps are referenced that align with the as-yet-unrealized priorities UW SMART and its many partners have been calling on for years:

**Consistent, research-driven training and technical assistance (TTA) for Washington's schools and districts:** On page 68 of the *Washington Thriving* plan, the SMART Center's partnership with the State and regional entities in providing TTA for Washington's 295 school districts and tribal schools is referenced. We believe Washington should emulate dozens of other states and *finally invest in a centralized resource for such TTA support, to help our schools implement proven prevention, early intervention, and school-based triage and treatment strategies.*

**Cost-effective school-based programs that work:** Page 68 of the Report references UW SMART's work scaling [Behavioral Health Student Assistance Programs \(BHSAP\)](#). These programs invest in associate's and bachelor's level Student Assistance Specialists (SASs) who provide higher volumes of prevention and early intervention services than schools can otherwise provide. [UW SMART's research](#) has found that SASs are more engaging to students than licensed clinicians, unanimously valued by school personnel, and promote positive mental health, attendance, and academic outcomes. *BHSAP should be expanded to all Washington schools and districts.*

**Conditional scholarships, training, and professional development for the school mental health workforce:** On Page 28, UW SMART's [Workforce for Student Well-Being](#) is presented as a bright spot in our state's current youth behavioral health landscape. *Workforce strategies such as these should be expanded to increase the number, diversity, and skills of Educational Staff Associates (ESAs), in partnership with the Washington Student Achievement Council.*

**Research-based universal screening:** Page 89 of Washington Thriving references the SMART Center's [Landscape Analysis of Universal Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health \(SEBMH\) Screening in Washington State Schools and Districts](#) that was requested by the Washington State Legislature. School-based screening can identify students who need support early, connecting them to help, improving wellness and school success, and even saving lives. However, such screening work must be done well to succeed. *We recommend consistent support to districts and schools to achieve the goal of consistent, effective, culturally responsive SEBMH screening.*

The SMART Center is encouraged by the *Washington Thriving* strategic plan and is eager to help realize its vision. However, as quoted by Richelle Madigan, Executive [Director of Washington State Community Connectors](#), *"it will take all of us"* to help our legislators achieve the political will to invest in this plan.

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*If you have ideas on how we can join together in this quest, or just want to discuss these priorities, please do not hesitate to contact us at [uwsmart@uw.edu](mailto:uwsmart@uw.edu).*