



RECLAIMING FUTURES

Communities helping teens overcome drugs, alcohol & crime

Vision Purpose:

To build a collective vision and dream for our young people in King County, with an emphasis on substance use and mental health recovery and supporting those disconnected from education and career pathways

Our Vision for our Community

Close your eyes for a moment and take a journey with us into the year 2024. A diverse team of King County residents that includes a former gang member; elementary, middle and high school students; a grandmother; spiritual leader; mental health provider and a case manager are giving a tour to visitors from across the country to see why King County has been voted the best place for children, youth and young adults to thrive in America. The tour is also attended by Washington's Governor, the King County Executive and Seattle's Mayor.

Welcoming, Rigorous Schools

The first stop is a public school. Students welcome the group and eagerly introduce themselves. Throughout the building children are participating in culturally relevant educational activities that encourage and celebrate all students regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, citizenship status, or ability. Their skills and the gifts of their diversity are clearly displayed throughout classrooms and hallways with poetry, photographs, paintings and essays. Our tour guides mention that our public schools have been recognized nationally as a catalyst in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) learning and there is an emphasis on helping students develop relevant skills that prepare them for college and careers. An 11-year-old Somali girl whispers to her mother, "I want to go to this school."

Everyone feels drawn into the welcoming and rigorous learning environments that are nurtured by teachers and students who are thriving spiritually, mentally, and physically. In one classroom youth gather around a large video monitor and are talking and sharing experiences with youth in a school in Indonesia. We walk past other classrooms where students use cutting-edge technology to support their learning. Older students are mentoring younger students about the impact of violence and bullying and the power of positive relationships. One Pacific Islander young man describes his school as a place where everyone has a positive experience and where differences in how people learn are recognized and encouraged.

All children and youth are actively engaged in a culturally competent, responsive and rigorous education system that prepares all students for college and/or career success.

As part of the school's effort to create a "college-going culture" several teachers are wearing their college sweatshirts and we see posters throughout the building with positive messages about different career options and reminders about what it takes to prepare for and succeed in college. On the way out the door, we stop to look at the school's wellness center. The center is staffed with mental health, substance use, and physical health professionals with bilingual interns working alongside them. When we stop by staff are reviewing recent research on adolescent brain development, and talking about what it means for the youth and families they serve.

As the team leads the group further into the heart of the community, the [King County determinants of equity](#) are visible. For example we see children living in safe, vibrant neighborhoods where neighbors know each other, public transportation is available, and the environment promotes health and well-being. Services are visible and accessible throughout, making the community itself a wraparound for all residents. The commitment to every youth having a healthy, positive person they can relate to in their life is clear. Employers give paid time off for adults to act as mentors and in every direction we see children and youth actively engaged with adults of all ages in conversation, painting murals, reading, exercising, playing games, sharing technology, and talking about politics and employment.

The community is fair and just, and all children are safe, thriving and ready to learn.

Supportive, Connected Neighborhoods

As the team continues their tour we see young adults fixing swings on the playground while younger children play. A trusted police officer who has positive relationships with community members is talking with a group of teens about their ideas for how to improve the community with arts and music and how youth who drop out of school need multiple pathways to graduation, college and work. A diverse group of youth is kicking a soccer ball around in a field receiving coaching from several adults.

All community members, including young people, are aware of their obligation to give back to their community and their voices are valued and respected.

One young man, a former gang member, shares his story of how he transitioned out of gang culture. "When I got out of prison I was embraced by positive people, both individuals and staff from agencies in the community that connected me to resources and helped me stay positive. Thanks to the prison-to-postsecondary program, I was able to finish my GED and get some college credits. That meant I could get a job that paid enough that I didn't want to run the streets." He proudly stated, "I used to be a part of the problem, now I feel like I'm a part of the solution."

As the tour continues a young person asks about a nearby building. The tour guide says it is one of many youth and family service agencies in the county, and the next stop on the tour. We soon find ourselves in a bright, colorful building with pictures of families everywhere and bookshelves with information in multiple languages. Staffs who represent a wide range of cultures and ethnicities

Health and wellbeing of all, regardless of immigration status, is promoted through equitable access, coordination and connection to age-appropriate, culturally responsive services and resources in the community. Services recognize and value the impact of history on the individual and family.

welcome us. Parents and youth engage in conversations with staff that we learn have been trained in how to communicate without judgment. In addition to housing an award-winning preschool program, the facility has a range of rooms and community-friendly spaces designed to accommodate different kinds of conversations and meetings, as well as other space for people to work at tables with craft supplies and learning materials. One teen explained that he found out about this agency when a teacher at his school recognized he was struggling with mental health/substance use issues, listened to his story, and offered specific options of readily available resources.

Beyond Treatment

A mother walks over to the group and describes how moving to King County has changed the quality of life for her entire family. She explains how her son struggled with substance abuse and was expelled from the public school system. Since getting involved in the support services at youth and family services over a year ago, he enrolled in one of eight recovery schools in the county and will be graduating from high school on time and going to college. The program director says there are hundreds of success stories like the one we just heard, because the agency is focused on the strengths of families, delivery of culturally competent services, and individual treatment plans that empower youth and families to do what's going to work best for them, including transitions planning and support. As a result of all of this, parents are available emotionally and involved in their children's recovery process.

All children and youth have access to unbiased and appropriate health and behavioral health services, education and justice as proposed by the Equity and Social Justice Initiative.

Many others share their stories as well. A bi-racial young man from Ballard shares with us how he struggled with substance abuse and mental health issues. "I used to feel ashamed and thought I would never be a successful person, but through working with my recovery circle I've learned to accept myself and not allow my disease of addiction to determine my future." Another Latino parent says she used to be embarrassed that her daughter had a mental health disorder. She never shared with her family or co-workers what her daughter was going through and often made up excuses to take off from work to talk with school administrators and counselors. "Thanks to the family networking group, I understand that sharing with others is part of the healing process and I understand that my daughter's struggles are biological and nothing to be embarrassed about. I also realize that I am not the only parent going through this and that I have a support group of peers in my community. Now I am able to help others as I continue on my journey."

Due to an active community collaborative and accessible information clearinghouse, families and communities are more informed about mental health and substance use disorders, and the stigmas once associated with these disorders no longer exists. Ongoing coordination between systems, treatment providers and the community ensures that youth and families are connected to resources and young people don't have to jump through hoops or sit in detention to receive the help they need.

Transformative Justice

The spiritual leader and the former gang member escort the group to the Children and Family Justice Center (CFJC), where we are greeted by a prosecuting attorney who reports that King County has the lowest youth crime rate in the nation. A large part of that, she explains, is the way we approach crime. She notes two thoughtful space configurations in the CFJC that illustrate a fundamental shift where the addition of a resource center and “soft-pods” that are used as transition beds instead of incarceration cells. She also allows the group to observe a court proceeding that is in progress. It looks like two families sitting in a room problem-solving with a mediator. The person we thought was a mediator is in fact a judge. In other court rooms we see similar proceedings. In most cases the families, faith leaders, teachers, mentors, youth workers and counselors are all a part of the process.

Transformative/restorative justice principles guide the King County Children and Family Justice Center.

A judge later explains, “Incarceration is not an appropriate response for the majority of the young people we serve. Our goal is restoration and transformation.” The court responds to an infraction with a holistic approach created to help youth reach their full potential. “We care about things like their education and living situation, and we involve other systems that impact their lives. For example, faith-based leaders are a critical part of the healing process because spirituality is an important component in recovery and in developing healthy, well-balanced individuals and it also contributes to the moral fabric of our community and society.” The judge points out that in most cases youth come to juvenile court for low-level non-violent offenses which often involve drugs or alcohol. “We can intervene and disrupt the downward progression of a drug or alcohol dependent youth.” One effective approach has been to shorten the time it takes for teens to get from initial screening to an assessment and from assessment to being connected to resources in the community. Natural Helpers in the community and parents all work together to help teens stay engaged in education, find safe and healthy paths to problem solve with families, and develop successful ways for the community to support transition and recovery. The group is later introduced to some teens who work as peer mentors in the Children and Family Justice Center. One girl said, “I feel it’s my duty to give back. Everyone should have access to the American Dream: health, love, housing, education, and wealth.”

All community stakeholders – faith-based, business, health, education, juvenile justice, philanthropic and others – share accountability for the prosperity of all and ensure that each child and youth is connected to positive supportive adults/families.

The CFJC Chief Judge leaves his meeting stating, “Currently a vast majority of the detention facility is dedicated to a triage center to provide resources to youth and families in crisis, youth stabilization and detoxification services, transition beds, education and employment support, with the primary goal of connecting youth and families to the best resources and services in the community. Our intent is to balance community safety with alternatives to incarceration and partner with communities to reclaim our youth.”

Collaboration and Equity

On the final part of the tour, the team attends a luncheon and reception with the Reclaiming Futures Fellowship Team, business owners, and other community stakeholders to commemorate the collaborative work of community members, judges, educators, probation counselors and service providers. Many other people from the community are celebrated for the outstanding work they do with youth and families beyond treatment and the court system.

Faith leaders describe outreach and mentoring happening throughout the county, and business owner's showcase employment training and apprenticeship opportunities that have created numerous living-wage jobs for youth and young adults. The afternoon ends with the King County

Prosecutor thanking the community for continued collaboration and for ongoing attention to equity and results, which has led to decreases in crime and the development of strong and vibrant communities.

We see a County that is fair and just, where all kids are safe. We see a County where people prioritize equity, share common understandings and embrace and celebrate racial and cultural differences. We see a County where all children receive quality, equitable services across the health, education, human services and justice systems.

We see a County where elected leaders make explicit efforts to address institutional racism and inequity in employment education and criminal justice, which significantly reduces recidivism among blacks and Latinos in the justice system and therefore alters the trajectory of the cradle to prison pipeline. We see a County that values community engagement, where people look out for one another, and where there is a focus on giving back. We see and feel the hope of a healthy and vibrant community, a County where everyone has access to the

All child-serving institutions and organizations work collaboratively across disciplines to provide equitable support and services to children of every socio-economic background with a focus on deconstructing and dismantling institutional racism.