Housing Instability and Education

A Thematic Analysis of Seven Youth Focus Groups

Purpose:
Communities of Practice Focus Groups, September 2025 – May 2026

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BUILDING CHANGES

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Executive Summary

Building Changes conducted seven focus groups during the six Communities of Practice across Washington State with young people who experienced housing instability during their K-12 or postsecondary education, seven recordings in total. All interviews were conducted by Bétyna Berice, Senior Research Associate. This report presents a thematic analysis of all seven transcripts where seven themes emerged, summarized below and detailed in the sections that follow:

- Instability follows a small number of recognizable pathways rather than being purely idiosyncratic.
- Instability systematically undermines schooling, but rarely extinguishes participants' desire to finish.
- One consistent adult relationship (usually a teacher, counselor, or social worker) is repeatedly described as decisive.
- Formal programs help, but late discovery and inconsistent staffing are the recurring bottleneck.
- Mental health need is pervasive and frequently outpaces local system capacity.
- Participants converge, independently, on a consistent set of actionable system-change recommendations.
- Resilience is framed as much around self-reliance and spite as around external support.

Introduction

This report documents a thematic analysis of seven Building Changes focus groups held with young people who experienced housing instability during their K-12 or postsecondary education. The discussion was designed to gather information regarding the following outcomes:

- To understand what pathways lead young people into housing instability.
- To understand how housing instability affects school enrollment, attendance, and completion.
- To understand which relationships and resources participants found most helpful.
- To understand participants' awareness of and experience with McKinney-Vento, HSSP, and Passport to College.
- To understand barriers participants faced in accessing housing and education supports.
- To understand participants' mental health and wellbeing during periods of instability.
- To understand what participants themselves would recommend to improve the system.

Participants provided information through group discussion facilitated by Bétyna Berice, Senior Research Associate. This report organizes findings by cross-cutting theme rather than by individual outcome, since participant responses consistently touched multiple outcomes within a single answer; the companion Dedoose codebook preserves that granularity for future coding.

Sites and Participants

Site	Participants	Notable Context
Bremerton	4 participants	Passport/HSSP-connected; mental health system gaps

Site	Participants	Notable Context
Central WA / Wenatchee Valley	3 participants	Foster care, rural/cross-state relocation
Skagit Valley FG1	3–5 participants	Two transcription services merged for validity
Skagit Valley FG2	3 participants	Young parents; distinct from FG1
Spokane	2 participants	International relocation; sibling caregiving
Tacoma	3 participants	University-based Champions program
Vancouver-Clark County	2 participants	Family financial stability did not prevent instability

Table 1. Focus group sites, approximate participant counts, and notable context.

All interviews used a very similar question bank, which supports comparability but also means some cross-site similarity may partly reflect shared framing rather than pure convergence, an interpretive caveat carried throughout this report.

Participant Demographics

Across the seven groups, roughly 20 young people participated, ranging from about 18 to 24 years old. Housing status at the time of interview varied widely: from stable, independent housing to shelter stays, doubled-up arrangements, and active searches. Most participants were connected to at least one formal support (McKinney-Vento, HSSP, or Passport to College); several discovered these connections only after a crisis had already passed. Gender and cultural context were not systematically collected, but participants who volunteered this information described Hispanic/Latino, Black, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and white racial or ethnic backgrounds, one participant who is Deaf or hard of hearing, and at least two participants who referenced LGBTQ+ identity.

Methodology

Informed consent was collected from all participants prior to each focus group, and participants were told they could share as much or as little as they chose. This report reproduces participant language because tone and word choice are themselves data about how directly participants were willing to speak about hardship.

Skagit Valley FG1 Merge

Skagit Valley FG1 was transcribed by two independent services. Service A (Rev.com) preserved timestamps, full names, and fine-grained turn-by-turn speaker changes; Service B (GoTranscript.com) used auto-generated names and coarser paragraph breaks. Cross-referencing the two identified one participant whose name was rendered inconsistently by each service, and two passages Service A misattributed to the moderator that content clearly places with a participant. Both were corrected in a merged transcript, provided separately, which should be used as the FG1 source for coding going forward. Skagit Valley FG2 is a distinct session with different participants and was not merged with FG1.

Limitations

This analysis is a reading of seven small, non-random groups and should not be generalized to all youth experiencing homelessness in Washington State. The same moderator asked a very similar question set at every site, which aids comparability but may also produce convergence that partly reflects the interview structure.

Two brief passages in the Skagit Valley FG1 merged transcript could not be attributed to a name with full confidence. Finally, because all data are self-reported in a group setting, participants may have under- or over-shared relative to how they would respond one-on-one.

Thematic Findings

Theme 1: Recognizable Pathways into Instability

Across all six sites, participants' paths into housing instability clustered into a small number of recurring patterns: family conflict or abuse, parental substance use or incarceration, a parent's death or mental illness, financial collapse (eviction, unpaid rent), aging out of foster care with no placement available, and relocation or immigration without a support system. Instability was rarely a single event: one disruption reliably triggered a chain of school transfers, shelter stays, and further relationship ruptures that compounded for years.

The foster care pathway surfaced with particular force in Bremerton, where one participant described being 13 and effectively unplaceable: every family the county called turned her down, and she was too young for a group home. Parental incarceration and addiction ran through another Bremerton participant's account, where his father's arrest and flight from a halfway house forced a sudden move. In Skagit Valley, one participant connected years of physical abuse and neglect directly to being raised by adoptive parents after her biological father's incarceration for first-degree sexual assault, one of the most detailed instability narratives in the dataset. Financial collapse showed up more quietly but just as consequentially: in the same Skagit Valley group, another participant described losing housing not to conflict but to unpaid rent his mother could not cover, at the exact moment he felt too young to be expected to cover it himself. Relocation without support defined one Spokane participant's account, who moved from Kuwait at 15 and navigated an unfamiliar school system and a language barrier with no family safety net nearby.

> *"Every family that was open that they called said no. I was 13, so I wasn't old enough for a group home."* (Bremerton)
>
> *"The trauma itself really has destroyed me over the last 13 years... physical abuse, neglect, abandonment issues."* (Skagit Valley FG1)
>
> *"My parents would kind of drop them off... there was nothing I could really do, not being their sole custody."* (Spokane)
>
> *"A few months out of high school is when my parents kicked me out."* (Vancouver-Clark County)

Theme 2: Instability Undermines Schooling, Not the Desire to Finish

Every participant connected housing instability directly to academic harm: chronic absenteeism penalized by attendance-linked grading, school transfers that fragmented credit accumulation, and truancy flags for reasons outside their control. Despite this, the desire to graduate was almost universal and often intensely emotional; several turned to GED programs, alternative schools, or Running Start as workarounds.

The credit-loss pattern was strikingly consistent in its mechanics even as the causes varied. In Wenatchee, one participant attended a different school almost every year for six years and described the cumulative effect as losing track of what he had and hadn't completed. In Skagit Valley, another participant moved between six or more schools by his own count, spent two months at a school in Nebraska mid-year, and ultimately weighed dropping out entirely, not from a lack of motivation, but because re-enrolling meant starting mid-year in a system that treated him as behind rather than displaced. Yet the emotional pull toward finishing rarely faded.

One Bremerton participant described her graduation as the hardest thing she has ever done and recalled standing alone on the football field afterward, not sad, but profoundly changed by what it took to get there. That gap between desire and access, repeated across nearly every transcript, is one of the clearest structural findings in this analysis: young people are not opting out of school; they are being routed around it by systems that were not built to bend with them.

> *"I want my diploma so bad."* (Skagit Valley FG1)
>
> *"The most thing I'm proud of is graduating high school. It was so difficult."* (Bremerton)
>
> *"In 11th grade, I had only two credits."* (Skagit Valley FG2)
>
> *"I dropped out at 16... it just wasn't working anymore."* (Tacoma)

Theme 3: One Consistent Adult Relationship Is Repeatedly Decisive

Nearly every participant, at every site, credited a single adult (usually a school counselor, social worker, or one particular teacher) as the pivotal factor in staying in school or accessing services. These relationships are described as informal and often accidental rather than a guaranteed feature of the system, which several participants flagged as a risk worth fixing (see Theme 6).

What stands out across sites is how specific and personal these accounts are: participants did not credit "school staff" in the abstract, but one named individual who noticed them at a particular moment. One Bremerton participant described a teacher and the social worker he introduced her to as the only two adults in her life she could rely on, adding that she still talks to them and considers them family. In Wenatchee, a participant pointed to his high school counselor as his single biggest driving factor, and another Bremerton participant traced her entire connection to Passport and McKinney-Vento back to one social worker who happened to ask the right question during her junior year. A Tacoma participant described a similar moment: one person who took the time to encourage him toward his education when it would have been easier not to. The throughline is that none of these relationships were guaranteed by policy; they existed because one adult happened to pay attention, which is precisely why participants in Theme 6 push so hard for making that role formal rather than a matter of luck.

> *"He literally saved my life... I still talk to them now. They're like my parents."* (Bremerton)
>
> *"There was one person... he was the one who encouraged me to get my education."* (Tacoma)
>
> *"I only have my friends, genuinely, to fall back on."* (Vancouver-Clark County)
>
> *"For me, it was my Aunt Rosie."* (Skagit Valley FG2)

Theme 4: Programs Help; Awareness and Consistency Are the Bottleneck

Participants named a wide range of programs positively (McKinney-Vento, HSSP, Passport to College, Host Homes, Street Outreach Services, and local shelters) and described concrete benefits. Two problems recurred everywhere: late or accidental discovery of services, and overworked staff who could not sustain consistent contact. A third, quieter problem is an eligibility cliff at age 18, even where services legally extend further; the Tacoma group learned mid-interview, from the researcher, that support can extend to age 24.

The awareness gap was rarely framed as a criticism of any single program: participants who eventually connected with McKinney-Vento, Passport, or other programs spoke about them warmly. The frustration was almost entirely about timing. In Wenatchee, one participant had already paid for his first quarter of college out

of pocket before learning support existed. In Spokane, one participant said flatly that she did not know any of these programs existed until she arrived at community college, well past the point where earlier intervention could have changed her high school trajectory. Where programs were reached in time, the benefit was concrete and immediate: in Skagit Valley, one participant described Street Outreach Services providing vouchers, weekly check-ins, and help with phone bills, though he also noted the outreach workers' schedules were "slammed" enough that reaching them required knowing to call at a specific hour. That same tension (real help, undermined by capacity) echoed in Tacoma, where a participant described her McKinney-Vento liaison as so overworked that months passed before regular contact was established at all.

> *"I didn't know about any of these programs... until I was already at the college. At that point, I already paid for my first quarter out-of-pocket."* (Wenatchee)
>
> *"They were very overworked... it wasn't until later on that they had a plan for me to start seeing them regularly."* (Tacoma)
>
> *"I did not know about any of these programs. I didn't even know they existed until I came to community college."* (Spokane)
>
> *"I didn't know it was possible to fill it out without that [parent] information."* (Vancouver-Clark County)

Theme 5: Mental Health Need Is Pervasive and Under-Resourced

Mental health surfaced, unprompted, in every group: anxiety, depression, PTSD, and in one transcript, direct disclosure of suicidal ideation and self-harm. Diagnosis of ADHD, autism, or learning disabilities was frequently delayed into late adolescence, compounding struggles that had been misread as low effort. Local system capacity, not just individual need, was named directly as the constraint, and cultural stigma layered on top of it in at least one account.

One Bremerton participant's account was the clearest articulation of a system-capacity problem rather than a personal one: she described seeing five different therapists; being repeatedly turned away and naming the root cause precisely: Kitsap County effectively has one major mental health agency, and state insurance limits how many providers a client can see. In Skagit Valley, the disclosures went further; one participant spoke openly about depression, suicidal thoughts, and a history of self-harm, and also about medication ambivalence: describing years on antidepressants, ADHD medication, and sleep aids that he ultimately came off of, and questioning whether medication was being used as a substitute for more difficult, individualized care. In the second Skagit Valley group, another participant added a cultural dimension that few other participants named directly: in her words, Hispanic families carry a strong norm against discussing mental health openly, which she experienced as a barrier layered on top of the practical one of simply finding a provider.

> *"There's pretty much one universal agency for mental health in Kitsap... you can only go to see so many places."* (Bremerton)
>
> *"It's very common in Hispanic families... [that has] a huge cultural impact not to talk about mental health."* (Skagit Valley FG2)
>
> *"Especially when it comes to social isolation, I'm always dealing with social isolation, anxiety, depression."* (Tacoma)
>
> *"Resources that would have helped me in school would have been to be diagnosed with the ADHD, autism, a lot sooner."* (Bremerton)

Theme 6: Participants Have Specific, Actionable Recommendations

Across sites, and largely independent of one another, participants converged on: a specific, visibly responsible point person for housing instability; consistency and personal connection over caseload-driven contact; structured peer mentorship; explicit life-skills and financial-literacy instruction; expanded funding at the chokepoints they identified; and involving people with lived experience in service design.

These recommendations are notable for how concrete and low-cost several of them are. In Wenatchee, two participants separately proposed the same fix from different angles: a dedicated housing-stability counselor whose office and role are visibly, predictably known to students, potentially advertised with something as simple as a poster and a QR code near a cafeteria. In Tacoma, one participant's request was less about a new program and more about tone: she wanted contact that felt personal rather than transactional, contrasting a caseload-driven check-in with the simple, human version: a text asking how she was doing because someone had noticed her absence. Another participant in the same group pushed for structured financial literacy and "adulting" education, arguing that many of her peers were never taught to budget before being expected to live independently. A Wenatchee participant, drawing on his own connection to OHY's lived-experience programming, made the case most directly for involving young people who have been through the system in designing the services meant to serve the next cohort.

> *"It's nice being able to get a text being like, 'Hey, haven't seen you. How are you?'"* (Tacoma)
>
> *"There should be a counselor that is directed towards this, that is directed towards just helping the kids that need help throughout housing."* (Wenatchee)
>
> *"I wish students knew more about the importance of budgeting their first year."* (Tacoma)
>
> *"I want to be a teacher and be a support system for kids that could end up like me."* (Skagit Valley FG2)

Theme 7: Resilience Framed Around Self-Reliance and Spite

While supportive adults and programs mattered enormously, participants' own accounts of why they kept going leaned heavily on internally generated motivation: proving doubters wrong, refusing to repeat family patterns, and a strong self-reliant identity. Programs that frame youth as solely needing to be rescued, rather than needing consistent infrastructure around their own drive, may not land as intended.

One Wenatchee participant's framing was among the starkest in the dataset: he described understanding, plainly, that he was the person who would have to save himself, because no one else reliably would. A Skagit Valley participant described a closely related but distinct engine: not resignation, but defiance. Her parents had told her she would never make it in life, and she named proving them wrong as an active source of motivation even while acknowledging the toll that dynamic had taken on her mental health. This pattern echoed in Bremerton, where a participant explicitly framed her own path as breaking a generational cycle, the first in her family to attend college, deliberately not repeating patterns of substance use she had witnessed growing up. Taken together, these accounts suggest that many participants have built resilience as a form of self-protection against an unreliable system, which is worth honoring rather than overriding when designing support around them.

> *"Knowing that I am the person that's coming to save myself... nobody is coming to save me whatsoever."* (Wenatchee)
>
> *"I hate knowing that my parents told me I would never make it in life... I am more than happy to prove you wrong."* (Skagit Valley FG1)
>
> *"I'm not knocked up in the streets... and I'm the first person in my family to go to college."* (Bremerton)

> *"My whole life has been just focused on being able to get to college."* (Vancouver-Clark County)

What Young Adults Recommend

Across every site, participants were asked directly what would improve the system for the next young person who goes through what they went through. Their answers, summarized below, are their own words and priorities (not researcher inference) and are offered here as the report's central recommendations.

Make Support Visible and Findable Before Crisis Hits

The most frequently repeated request, across nearly every site, was simply to know a resource exists before it is too late to use it. Participants proposed low-cost, concrete fixes: posters and QR codes in cafeterias and common areas, a specific staff role whose title makes clear who to approach, and earlier outreach, in ninth grade, not senior year.

> *"A poster with the QR code near a cafeteria... where there could be multiple posters."* (Wenatchee)

Give Every Student One Consistent, Known Point of Contact

Participants distinguished sharply between being one of hundreds of names on a caseload and being known by a specific person. They asked for a dedicated housing-stability counselor or advocate whose role is visible and predictable, and for that relationship to be maintained proactively rather than only when a student reaches out first.

> *"There should be a counselor that is directed towards this, that is directed towards just helping the kids that need help throughout housing."* (Wenatchee)
>
> *"It's nice being able to get a text being like, 'Hey, haven't seen you. How are you?'"* (Tacoma)

Replace Caseload-Driven Check-Ins With Personal Ones

Several participants said the substance of a program mattered less than whether contact felt personal. They asked staff to check in consistently, to remember their situation without having to re-explain it each time, and to treat a missed appointment as a signal to reach out rather than a case to close.

> *"They were very overworked... it wasn't until later on that they had a plan for me to start seeing them regularly."* (Tacoma)

Teach Practical Life Skills Before Independence Is Forced

Participants repeatedly asked for explicit instruction in budgeting, credit, tenancy, cooking, laundry, and financial aid, skills they were expected to have without ever being taught. Several suggested this become a standard part of the curriculum for any student flagged as unaccompanied or unstably housed, rather than left to chance.

> *"I wish students knew more about the importance of budgeting their first year."* (Tacoma)

Fund and Expand the Services That Already Work

Rather than asking for entirely new programs, most participants asked for more capacity in what they had already found helpful: more mental health providers, more housing vouchers, and eligibility that does not end abruptly at 18 when many were only just beginning to stabilize.

> *"If we had another mental health agency that was just as big and popular... it would have a better outcome."* (Bremerton)

Put People With Lived Experience in the Room

Several participants argued that the people best positioned to design and improve these services are young people who have already been through them. They asked for lived-experience youth to be paid, consulted, and given real influence over program design, not just invited to share their story once.

> *"I want to be a teacher and be a support system for kids that could end up like me."* (Skagit Valley FG2)

Taken together, these six requests share a common thread: participants are not asking to be rescued. They are asking for a system that is easier to find, more consistent once found, and willing to make room for the people it serves to help design it.