

Hello again! This is Derek Firenze with your local news and commentary for Wednesday, February 12, 2025 beamed in from the *Jefferson County Beacon* for KPTZ 91.9FM in Port Townsend, Washington.

Port Townsend is of course famous for its annual Wooden Boat Festival, but some kids have complained that it can be hard to find anything to do if you don't do maritime activities. Many high schoolers in Port Townsend spend their leisure time at the Nest – a youth-oriented coffee shop operated by the nonprofit OWL360 in uptown Port Townsend within walking distance from the high school. OWL360 offers various programs and services through the Nest, but the space is only so large and can only serve a limited number of people at a time. Aldrich's and Elevated Ice Cream are also welcome hangouts, and the Uptown Public Library is a good, quiet place off the high school campus, but all of these places only provide space for kids to be, not things for them to do.

As for activities, there are actually many non-maritime programs, volunteer opportunities, and career training pathways for high schoolers, including opportunities with the North Olympic Salmon Coalition, Jefferson County Land Trust, Sunfield Biodynamic Farm Internship Program, Jefferson Teen Center, and Jefferson Healthcare Job Shadowing. All of these organizations have programs specifically geared toward youth. What they don't have, however, is a way for youth without reliable transportation to take advantage of these opportunities. Even teens who live within city limits may struggle to make a commitment that requires transit.

Perhaps you think the schools ought to handle this with after school activities? Well, while the Washington Constitution unequivocally requires public schools be “adequately funded,” since 2020, Jefferson County schools have been underfunded by over \$9 million. It's challenging to cut school funding because much of the school's operating expenses are spent on staff salaries and benefits. School districts are left with no other option but to hope voters approve tax levies to cover the funding that the State has not been able to give them.

Assuming the levies aren't passed in this week's special election, many Port Townsend school programs might get restructured or removed altogether. And even if the county's levies do pass there are no guarantees that those programs will be funded. Dr. Linda Rosenbury, superintendent of the Port Townsend School District, shared a key insight, saying, “If students aren't attending school programs, it's not because they aren't being offered – it's because there's a lack of transportation or similar factors related to low-income families. For example, if you can't get picked up by a family member from an after-school soccer practice, why would you even try out for soccer? When we talk about providing more ‘equity’ in education, it's not usually based around race or gender, but about dealing with the challenges faced by low-income students... like transportation.”

In 2024, 20% fewer low-income 9th graders at Port Townsend High passed their classes compared to their higher income peers. At Chimacum High School in 2023, only 29.4% of low-income students passed all their classes compared to 76% of non-low income 9th graders.

Of course, this also affects the mental health of local young adults. In 2023, Washington state's self-reporting health surveys showed that in all alcohol categories for 10th graders and nearly all categories for 12th graders in Jefferson County scored worse than the state average. The data states that 25.9% of 12th graders self-reported as drinking alcohol which is 7% more than the state average. 10th graders in Jefferson County have a stunning 64.4% access to alcohol, an increase of nearly 25% over the state average... and their lifetime alcohol use is nearly 20% higher than the state average.

Jefferson County needs a budget-friendly solution to the low-income problem, and Judge Brandon Mack has a good one. Mack recommends a volunteer program recruiting people willing to shuttle students from low-income families. He noted that there are still many retirees looking for some way to help, and believes this would be a great way to do it, given proper background checks to ensure student safety.

If we want to provide access to all the youth of Port Townsend and Jefferson County to attend after-school programs and create the kind of community involvement that prepares them for life after high school, we have to do more than just get adequate funding. We have to make sure the least able in our community have an equal opportunity to get out of their front door and then get back home again.

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon and 5pm Tuesday through Thursday, partnering on Wednesday with the Jefferson County *Beacon* to bring you stories from JeffCoBeacon.com. This is Derek Firenze. Thanks for listening.