

**EDUCATION**

# Schools help make sure kids have health insurance

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Five area school districts are now partnering with a local nonprofit to help ensure that all kids have health-care coverage.

In January, Ferndale schools began a pilot project to refer uninsured families to the Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access. The confidential service is free for both families and school districts. Schools identify uninsured kids at registration, teacher conferences and when families sign up for free and reduced-price meals. The alliance, which does not support a particular coverage plan, follows up with families to tell them about various health coverage options.

There are about 4,000 uninsured children in Whatcom, Skagit, Island and San Juan counties, said Wendy Carr, access coordinator for the alliance.

"There is a growing awareness of several obstacles that will prevent a child from learning," Carr said. Test "scores won't go up if health care is inaccessible."

Bellingham, Blaine, Ferndale, Mount Baker and Nooksack Valley school districts are currently signed up, and the alliance expects other districts will be on board soon.

During Ferndale's pilot project, 90 families were referred to the alliance, Carr said, and 34 families got insurance. Many families who were referred simply had questions about insurance. About half of the families who talked to Carr qualified for low-income plans and the other half were middle-income families who were self-employed or who couldn't afford the high cost of insurance. Many of those families did not realize they were eligible for help, Carr said.

After the project in Ferndale ended in June, the alliance made a few changes to the program and then took it countywide.

"Health care is so complicated nowadays," said Jennifer Lewis, family resource coordinator for the Mount Baker School District. The alliance "really fills the gap on helping people navigate all those complicated areas."

Lewis is grateful for the alliance as an expert resource to answer health-insurance questions, especially since schools are taking on more and more responsibilities.

"It's a big thing to expect school districts to do all that we do," Lewis said. "When a community group comes to your school and offers support like this, it's a pretty neat thing. It's neat to see school districts and community groups working together to help families."

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## ABOUT THE ALLIANCE

The Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access is a nonprofit coalition that includes the St. Luke's Foundation, St. Joseph Hospital and the Whatcom County Health Department. For more information, call 715-6594 or go to [www.whatcomalliance.org](http://www.whatcomalliance.org).