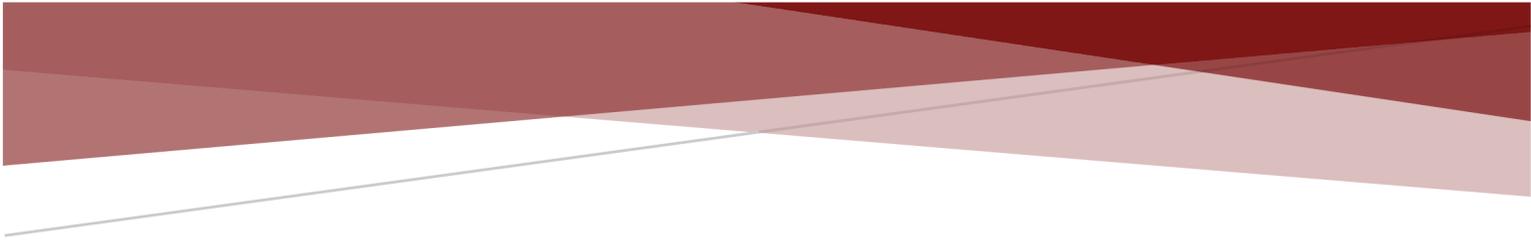# Review of Personal Service Contracts

The BERC Group

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Review of Personal Service Contracts

Prepared for Seattle Public Schools

The BERC Group

Introduction

Seattle Public Schools (SPS) uses Personal Services Contracts (PSCs) to bring in external expertise for a wide array of purposes. Some contracts fund technical or operational services, such as software implementation or specialized consulting. Others support professional learning for staff. A distinct and important subset of PSCs, however, involves student-facing services: tutoring and academic interventions, mentoring and social–emotional supports, arts and enrichment programming, and other direct work with students in and out of the school day.

Over time, the number and variety of student-facing PSCs have increased. Principals and program leaders have often turned to PSCs as a flexible tool, allowing them to respond to emerging needs, leverage grant or philanthropic funding, and pilot new services. Many of these contracts are perceived as essential supports, especially in schools with complex student needs or limited internal staffing. At the same time, district leaders have grown increasingly concerned that the systems surrounding PSCs were built primarily for fiscal and legal control, and not for the kind of safety, academic alignment, equity, and evaluation that are necessary when contracted adults work directly with students.

This strand of the audit focuses specifically on PSCs that fund student-facing services. The purpose is to describe how the current PSC system functions when external providers work with students, identify system-level strengths and gaps, and outline corrective actions that maintain strong fiscal controls while adding robust safeguards and expectations around safety, instruction, and impact. We attend to four anchors of quality: clarity (roles, approvals, and requirements), academic alignment (fit with school priorities such as the CSIP), safety (background checks, insurance, supervision, and liability), and consistency/equity (how similarly expectations are understood and applied across sites).

Our priority throughout the evaluation was strengths-based and improvement-oriented. Many procedures adhere to policy and already work well and many staff and volunteers go to great lengths to support students. The findings highlight where accountability and safety expectations are least visible or most variable, especially for student-facing work, so that school leaders and central teams share a common understanding of what "effective" looks like and can build on what's working while providing the tools, knowledge, and procedural guidance to sunset partnerships or contracts that do not serve the best interests of SPS students.

Methodology

BERC researchers use a theoretical framework that involves collecting multiple perspectives from stakeholders and employing rigorous data collection methods and analyses for mixed-methods evaluations (Creswell, 2022). In this study, the BERC research team employed a utilization-focused participatory evaluation model that centers intended users and practical use of findings (Patton, 2014). The inquiry focused on how accountability and safety expectations are interpreted in practice and the consistency of those practices across schools.

We engaged 27 stakeholders through 60–90 minute semi-structured interviews, with several participants meeting multiple times as the project scope expanded. Stakeholders included district

office staff spanning the organizational chart and PTSA leaders. This purposive approach ensured representation of decision-makers, implementers, and community partners who interact with student-facing services from different vantage points.

Researchers also reviewed key artifacts and administrative materials relevant to each strand, including PSC packets and routing/approval artifacts, insurance verification workflows (MyCOI), volunteer/background-check and sexual-misconduct training guidance, and representative school CSIPs to understand alignment expectations. Consistent with a utilization-focused, participatory stance, we triangulated across interviews, documents, and administrative artifacts.

Guiding Questions
1. How do student-facing PSCs currently enter and move through SPS systems, from initial idea at the school or department level to executed contract?
2. How are background checks, training, and insurance handled for PSC providers who work directly with students? Who is responsible for verification?
3. To what extent are PSC scopes-of-work aligned to school CSIPs, core curriculum, and district instructional priorities? Where, if at all, is academic oversight embedded in the process?
4. What structures exist to monitor implementation quality and evaluate the impact of student-facing PSCs on students and schools?

Findings

Intake and Routing: Clear, Consistent, and Fiduciary by Design
Student-facing services procured through PSCs moved through a single, uniform packet and routing path that was designed to ensure compliance with procurement rules and fiscal policy. The pathway was driven primarily by contract amount rather than by the nature of the services or the risk level associated with direct student contact. One contracting staff member explained that "we have something called an executive approval form that goes along with that PSC and it needs to be approved by multiple levels of… legal… the accounting manager. It comes to me in procurement, it goes to like a final signer… and it depends on dollar amount. We have like a whole matrix involved." This form and matrix determine who must sign off at various thresholds, adding layers of review as amounts increase.

Within this structure, the core focus of Contracting and Procurement is on method and compliance. Staff described their role as making sure that "the procurement method we're going to use" is appropriate and that necessary fiscal and legal documents are in order. One staff member noted that they "rely on our customers to tell us, like, these are the deliverables that we need to put in the scope of work," emphasizing that while they can be "thought partners," they do not lead on the content or academic side of the contract. The result is a routing process that is clear, consistent, and robust from a fiduciary standpoint. However, this process does not identify a PSC that funds tutoring or mentoring programs that place adults in direct, ongoing contact with students. There is no separate academic or risk-based review embedded in the standard route for student-facing PSCs.

School-Led Vetting and Oversight: PSCs Place Responsibility on Principals

Student-facing PSCs are typically initiated at the school level. Principals or other building leaders identify a perceived need, select a provider, and work with office staff to complete the PSC packet. In many cases, the impetus comes from informal networks or staff recommendations. One interviewee described how a teacher might approach the principal and say, "Hey, my friend works at such-and-such school, and they're using TIPS tutors. Can we use TIPS tutors?" The principal, trusting the teacher, might respond, "Yeah… why don't you look into it," setting in motion the contracting process.

This pattern leads to a situation where, in the words of one interviewee, "the principals are the main drivers of these contracts and partnerships. They accept them in." Internal notes on contracting practices observed that for contracts under a certain amount—often $40,000—central procurement does not require formal RFPs or solicitations, as long as principals indicate the vendor aligns with CSIP goals. In practice, this means the PSC mechanism "puts vetting back on the school," with principals expected to judge provider quality and fit using whatever information and relationships they have at hand.

Some principals do this work thoroughly, drawing on experience, cross-school conversations, and local data. Others, constrained by time and competing demands, may rely more heavily on reputation or the perceived credibility of the person making the recommendation. Central offices have limited visibility into the criteria schools use or the decisions they make. There is no standard vetting checklist or shared framework, and no expectation that student-facing PSCs be reviewed by content experts for alignment with curriculum and instructional practices.

Once a PSC is executed, there is no districtwide, routine mechanism to track how student-facing services are implemented or what impact they have. Implementation quality and outcome monitoring are largely left to principals and teachers. Interviewees described this situation as highly variable. One leader commented that evaluation is "very principal-dependent, and most of them don't see it as their job to evaluate the impact of a partner." They went on to point out that "we don't have a directive… from the central office level. We don't have conditions or requirements of principals when they have a partner in their building… whether it's central office placed, or… a choice they've made… to have that personal service contract evaluated."

Another conversation raised the broader question: "There's partners already doing work. Where is the accountability? Where is the impact analysis?" These reflections highlight an absence of shared tools, expectations, or rhythms for reviewing PSC-funded programs after they begin. Some principals may informally gather feedback from staff or students, look at relevant data, and adjust or discontinue services. Others may renew contracts from year to year based on comfort, habit, or perceived satisfaction, even when there is little systematic evidence of impact.

At the system level, the district lacks a consolidated view of which PSC-funded programs exist, whom they serve, and how they perform. There is no structured way for positive models to be identified and scaled or for less effective or misaligned services to be phased out. This limits SPS's ability to learn from PSC investments and to make evidence-informed decisions about where to focus future contracting.

Fiscal Controls: Strong, Tiered Safeguards with Missing Academic Sign-Off

The fiscal architecture governing PSCs is widely regarded as strong. Staff described a clear system of thresholds and requirements. For services under a specified dollar amount, schools can proceed without formal competitive processes. Above certain amounts—often around $30,000 or $75,000 depending on context—informal quotes or full bidding processes are required. These rules reflect state and district procurement policies and are enforced consistently.

In addition to method requirements, contracting staff highlighted several non-negotiable fiscal and legal prerequisites. One staff member explained that before writing a contract, they verify "W9, business license, insurance," and stressed that "if those things are not obtained, which is part of the packet, then she will also push back. Because we will not write a contract if we do not have all these documents." The executive approval form ensures that legal counsel, accounting, procurement, and a final signer review contracts at appropriate thresholds, guided by the matrix described earlier.

These safeguards provide strong protection around budget integrity, legal compliance, and basic risk management. However, they do not include a systematic academic sign-off for student-facing PSCs. There is no built-in requirement that someone with responsibility for instruction confirm that a given contract is aligned with CSIP priorities, consistent with core curriculum, appropriate for the school's context, or designed with clear educational outcomes in mind. A central leader captured this gap succinctly, saying, "I don't think the issue is, like, fiduciary responsibility. I think that part is taken care of. I think it's the academic part… that's where this kind of all started. That plus safety."

Safety and Compliance Gaps

Safety and compliance expectations for PSC providers are present in contract language but are not consistently verified or monitored in practice, especially for student-facing services. Standard PSC boilerplate requires contractors to comply with district policies and procedures, to ensure that staff complete mandatory trainings, and to confirm that any individuals working with students have appropriate background checks and sexual misconduct training. However, much of this is handled through contractor attestation rather than through district-run processes.

Insurance compliance is somewhat stronger, thanks to the use of a third-party system like MyCOI, which tracks certificates and coverage. Contracting staff explained that "we have a MyCOI system which is a third-party company that verifies our insurance… everybody's supposed to be funneling through there and I don't know if all PSC's are." This suggests that while a robust tool exists, its use for all student-facing PSCs is not yet universal simply because different staff are responsible for the insurance workflow based on the funding level of the PSC. Staff also described situations where they had to troubleshoot coverage limits or missing endorsements on a case-by-case basis, indicating that responsibility for follow-up is not consistently defined.

Recommendations

Incorporate academic and risk-based review into the PSC workflow

Student-facing PSCs should be explicitly identified and subject to additional academic and safety review, rather than treated identically to contracts for technical or non-student-facing services. This can begin with modest but important design changes. All PSC intake and routing forms should require the initiator to indicate whether the contract involves direct student-facing services. When the student-facing box is checked, the contract should automatically follow an augmented routing path that includes academic and safety review steps in addition to the existing fiscal approvals. As part of this augmented pathway, the initiator should provide an instructional impact statement and CSIP alignment statement. This justification should clearly describe the problem of practice or need the service is intended to address, how the service supports existing school goals and initiatives, and why a contracted solution is being pursued rather than an internal one. The initiator should also identify the target student group, including any priority populations (for example, multilingual learners, students receiving special education services, or students performing below grade level), and describe how students will be selected or invited to participate.

Scopes-of-work for student-facing PSCs should then be routed to the appropriate Teaching and Learning office or relevant program department (for example, literacy, mathematics, or college and career readiness) for academic review. The purpose of this review is not to re-run the procurement process, but to confirm that the proposed services are consistent with SPS curriculum, instructional frameworks, and beliefs about effective practice, and that they do not introduce approaches or materials that conflict with district standards. Academic reviewers should also have the opportunity to recommend adjustments to scope, dosage, or integration with existing supports, so that contracted services complement rather than compete with internal efforts.

Use Unified Insights to Track Impact on Student Outcomes

To improve accountability and decision-making, all vendors and schools should track the outcomes of their key contracts using Unified Insights. This would allow school leaders to monitor student progress in areas such as attendance, course grades, assessment growth, or SEL metrics for students served by vendors. Embedding these metrics in the PSC process will help ensure programs are continuously improving and genuinely advancing district goals. Centralizing data at the district level also supports equity by identifying which programs are closing opportunity gaps and which are not.

To operationalize this vision the district should retool the Unified Insights platform to accommodate both implementation data submitted by vendors and outcome data analyzed by district staff. This will require developing a standardized data submission protocol for vendors, integrated into the existing PSC process, along with clear guidance on metrics aligned to CSIP goals. Once the platform infrastructure is in place, a member of the Partnerships team, which currently owns Unified Insights, along with staff from Research and Evaluation, should plan and implement targeted professional development for principals starting with those in their first five years on using Unified Insights not just for compliance but as a decision-making tool. To reduce

cognitive load and ensure sustainability, Partnerships would also create user-friendly templates, reflection tools, and data review protocols that principals can use during BLT or CSIP meetings. The BERC Group can assist Partnerships in planning and implementation to ensure alignment with partnership evaluation process and procedures.

Revamp Required Safety and Liability Structures

For safety, consistency, and legal compliance, all partners and contractors working directly with students must complete the district's Samaritan system application process. This important tool that is already in use for volunteers brings the background check process into district control and ensures that records are up to date and people that should not be doing work in the district are flagged before they enter a building. The Samaritan registration should be non-negotiable and monitored regularly to ensure that only fully vetted individuals and organizations are engaging with students in any capacity. Standardizing this requirement will also build trust with families and ensure that school-based programming adheres to the highest standards of student safety and legal accountability. In addition, the district should standardize the insurance verification process to ensure that all partners are providing and updated their insurance requirements via MyCOI. A clearly documented process will help prevent liability gaps, reduce delays in contract processing, and ensure that all partners meet consistent districtwide safety and risk standards. To verify these steps were taken, an additional safety signature should be required before contracts are executed to ensure that background checks for all employees involved in the contract were run through Samaritan and are acceptable to come into an SPS building.

To carry this work forward, The BERC Group can support the district by convening a cross-functional safety and compliance committee consisting of representatives from HR, Risk Management, Contracts, and school leadership to co-develop a unified safety checklist for all student-facing external providers, regardless of whether they are engaged through an MOU or PSC. BERC can facilitate the committee's work in identifying critical non-negotiables, such as background check verification, emergency protocols, sexual misconduct training, and insurance coverage, similar to what is already required for partners, and develop a streamlined guidance document and intake process aligned to those requirements for all student-facing contractors as well. To ensure these guardrails are enforced systemwide, The HR department should lead the expansion of the Samaritan vetting system to cover all MOUs and PSCs and help formalize the MyCOI insurance verification process by clearly defining roles, responsibilities, and escalation protocols across departments. HR staff should also work with technology staff to create integration between Samaritan and Verkada, enabling school leaders to view real-time compliance status at the building level.