

Connecticut FAFSA Completion Report

2021-22



September 2022

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Executive Summary

Completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a critical postsecondary milestone for Grade 12 students seeking to attend college or a trade school. For students who meet specific income requirements, it can unlock tens of thousands of dollars in public and private sources of financial aid, paving the way for them to attend school at a significantly reduced cost than otherwise possible. Because many prospective first-year college students typically complete the FAFSA during their senior year of high school, the Connecticut Governor’s Office and the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) recognize the importance of raising awareness of and helping students complete the FAFSA to support their postsecondary pursuits.

In the 2021-22 school year, Connecticut ran its second FAFSA Challenge, a program that seeks to improve student outcomes, close opportunity gaps, and spark innovation in schools to promote FAFSA completion. Following the success of the pilot year in 2021, 40 schools participated in the 2021-22 Challenge, collectively raising their completion rate by 8.1 percentage points, while the overall statewide rate inched up slightly by 1.5 percentage points. As a cohort, schools that opted to receive more intense resources and support - including larger microgrants and human capital investments through trainings and professional development opportunities – collectively saw a gain of nearly 10.0 percentage points. For the second time in a row, the FAFSA Challenge has improved completion rates for participating schools, and enabled students, particularly those from high-needs backgrounds to access grants and other vital aid to defray the costs of attending a postsecondary institution.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 2021-22 school year, the Connecticut Governor’s Office and CSDE launched the second Connecticut FAFSA Challenge, a college/career readiness program that aims to bolster completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) across Connecticut’s highest-need high schools. Over the last two years, the State of Connecticut has attached greater prominence to the FAFSA due to its role in unlocking thousands of dollars in federal, state, institutional, and private aid for students attending a postsecondary school. As such, the state has taken several steps to raise awareness of the application among district leaders, school staff, and families. These include:

- FAFSA completion data dashboard on [EdSight](#), which shows completion rates at the state, district, and school level;
- a secure dashboard that provides authorized users in districts and schools with access to individual, student-level FAFSA completion information;

- passage of PA 21-199, which requires districts to adopt a policy for increasing FAFSA completion;
- passage of PA 22-116, which incentivizes districts to improve completion rates as a means to tap into greater funding for school mental health specialists; and,
- the introduction of the College Advising Corps in Connecticut, which places near-peer advisers in high-needs high schools to support Grade 12 students with the college application, enrollment, and matriculation processes.

The Connecticut FAFSA Challenge represents yet another initiative to level the playing field for students who desire to attend a postsecondary institution but for whom financial and other barriers preclude them from doing so.

Following the success of the pilot year, where 26 high schools collectively increased their FAFSA completion rate by 4 percentage points in the 2020-21 school year, the CSDE launched the second FAFSA Challenge with three goals in mind:

1. **Improve Student Outcomes:** Support students in achieving their goals for college, career, and life success by addressing FAFSA completion as a core access milestone.
2. **Close Opportunity Gaps:** Promote access for all students by closing opportunity gaps for historically marginalized student groups and school communities.
3. **Spark Innovation:** Support schools in pursuing creative ideas to promote FAFSA completion.

In September 2021, Governor Ned Lamont and Commissioner of Education Charlene Russell-Tucker publicly recognized the winners of the previous year’s Challenge while inviting 53 schools from 25 districts to participate in the subsequent Challenge. These schools were selected based on their 2021 FAFSA completion rate, percent of students eligible for free- or reduced-price meals (FRPM), and senior class size. Of these, 40 schools representing 19 school districts accepted the challenge to increase their FAFSA completion rates by 5 percentage points.

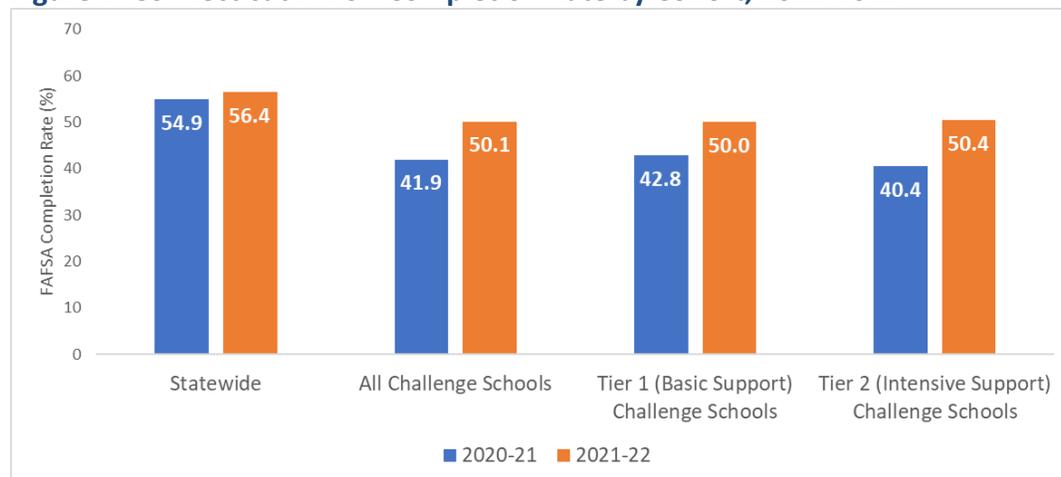
Participating schools (“Challenge schools”) were allowed to opt into one of two tiers of support. Tier I schools were afforded a modest microgrant, access to FAFSA trainings provided by uAspire, and access to aggregate and student-level data about FAFSA completion through EdSight. Schools that opted to participate in Tier II received a larger microgrant and access to uAspire-led trainings and EdSight data insights, but also participated in monthly Community of Practice meetings facilitated by the Connecticut Rise Network. Additionally, ten of these Tier II schools received coaching and other professional development from Rise Network staff.

Furthermore, the CSDE also expanded or introduced several auxiliary resources to support students and families with FAFSA completion. About 10,000 students in high schools with an FRPM percentage that was at least 35% who had not yet completed the FAFSA were mailed a postcard in March 2022 reminding them of free in-person and virtual tools that they could leverage to assist with completing their FAFSA. These included virtual sessions with FAFSACT.org, a portal for all students to work one-on-one with financial aid administrators from across Connecticut’s public and private universities on various financial aid forms; a call number to SimplifyCT, one of Connecticut’s largest Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) providers with volunteers trained in FAFSA completion; and a new [FAFSA Family Toolkit](#) created by the RISE Network available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#). Finally, through a partnership with CTCollegeBound, many postsecondary institutions and college access organizations from across the state volunteered to serve as “[buddies](#)” with local high schools to assist with FAFSA completion.

Results

This report presents results of the second Connecticut FAFSA Challenge for Challenge schools and for the state, while also disaggregating completion status for students eligible for FRPM. Schools participating in the FAFSA Challenge collectively increased their rates by 8.1 percentage points from 42.0 percent to 50.1 percent, although there was variation among and within tiers. Tier I schools improved by 7 percentage points, from 43.0 percent to 50.0 percent. Tier II schools, receiving a more robust suite of resources, improved from 40.5 percent to 50.4 percent, a gain of nearly 10 percentage points. Figure 1 shows completion rates at the state, cohort, and challenge tier levels. For the second time, Challenge schools showed significant improvements and growth at a rate that exceeded the slight statewide increase of 1.5 percentage points.

Figure 1: Connecticut FAFSA Completion Rate by Cohort, 2021-2022



Of the 40 Challenge schools, 30 met or exceeded their goal of improving completion rates by 5 percentage points, with 20 schools improving their rates by more than 10 percentage points. Of the 25 Tier I schools, 18 (72%) met or surpassed their 2022 FAFSA Completion goal while 12 of the 15 Tier II schools (80%) met or surpassed their goal. Figures 2 and 3 show the growth and overall achievement of each Challenge school, with schools enclosed by green dotted box representing those that achieved their five-percentage-point goal.

Figure 2: 2022 FAFSA Challenge Results, Tier I

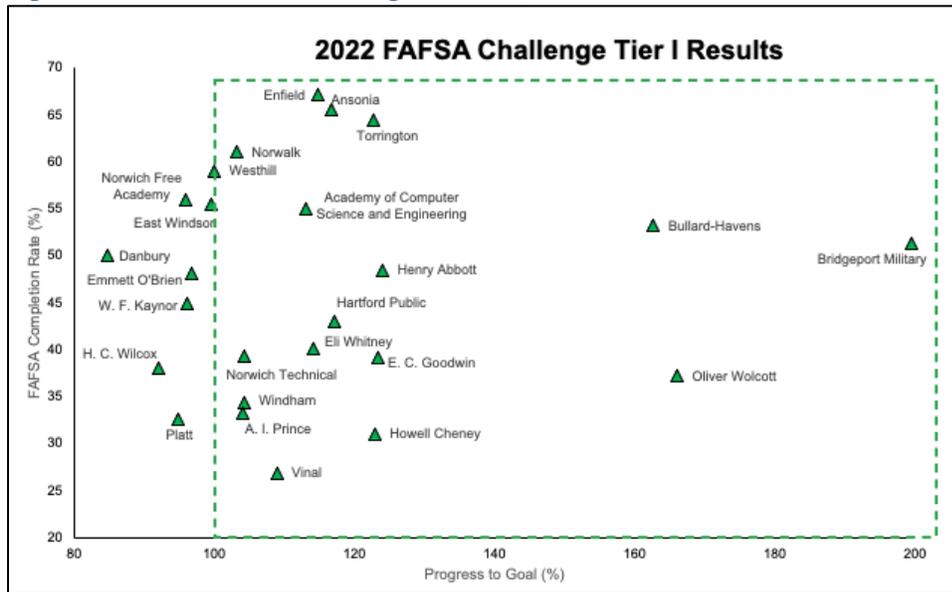
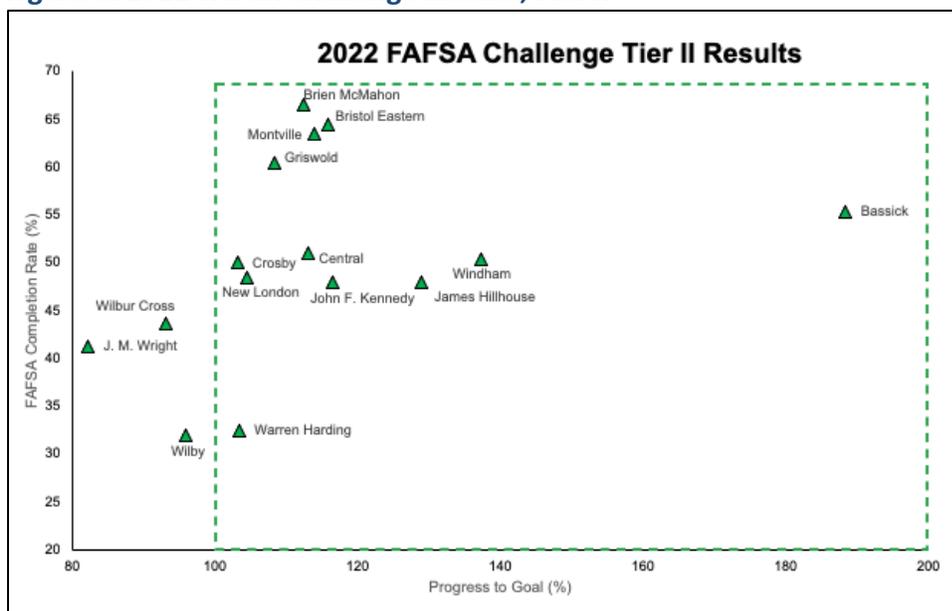


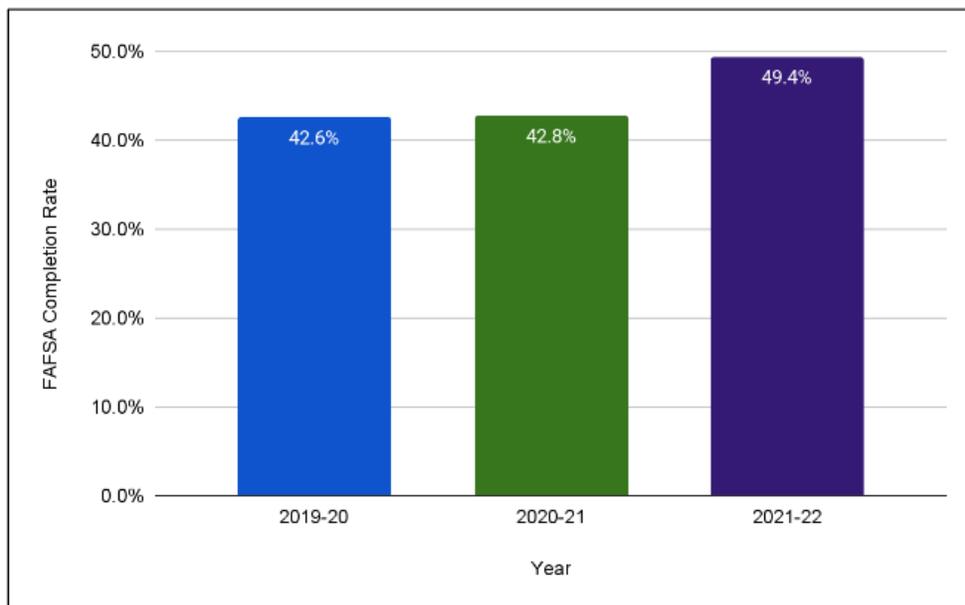
Figure 3: 2022 FAFSA Challenge Results, Tier II



At the state level, Connecticut’s FAFSA completion rate ended at 56.4% for the 2021-22 school year, slightly higher than the rate of 54.9% for the 2020-21 school year. It should be noted that starting with the 2021-22 school year, students who graduated during the year are included in the analyses. Additionally, students who entered Connecticut public schools after March 1, 2022, as well as students who were 21 or older as of August 1, 2022, are excluded from these analyses.

Finally, this report examines FAFSA completion for students eligible for FRPM. While there was not much change between 2019-20 and 2020-21, between 2020-21 and 2021-22, Figure 4 shows that the completion rate for students eligible for FRPM increased by nearly 7 percentage points. This increase is likely attributable to the similar increase in completion rates among the larger cohort of 2021-22 FAFSA Challenge schools, which disproportionately serve a larger number of students with high needs, including those eligible for FRPM.

Figure 4: FAFSA Completion Rates for Students Eligible for Free- or Reduced-Price Meals



Conclusion

The success of the Connecticut FAFSA Challenge over the last two years demonstrates that school counselors, administrators, and other educators in some of our highest need high schools can, and are, making a tremendous difference in preparing students for their college and career aspirations. In that spirit, the Connecticut Governor’s Office and the CSDE will be continuing the FAFSA Challenge during the

2022-23 school year, to once again raise the bar and challenge participating schools to increase their FAFSA completion rates, with the goal of reducing or potentially eliminating the financial barrier for students and families in their quest for higher education.