

CONNECTICUT STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

FAFSA Completion Challenge Request for Proposals (RFP) 2020



Due: January 6th, 2021

RFP #829

**Connecticut State Department of Education
Office of Innovation & Partnerships
450 Columbus Boulevard, Suite 603
Hartford, CT 06103-184**

Dr. Miguel A. Cardona
Commissioner of Education

Under federal antidiscrimination laws, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), as a recipient of federal funds, must include a statement of nondiscrimination in all publications, posting, handbooks, announcements, bulletins, and application forms that it makes available to employees, students, parents, applicants, sources of referral of applicants, and all unions and professional organizations (see below). This must be done in order to ensure compliance with federal requirements. The Department's approved statement reads as follows:

The CSDE is committed to a policy of affirmative action/equal opportunity for all qualified persons. The Connecticut Department of Education does not discriminate in any employment practice, education program, or educational activity on the basis of age, ancestry, color, civil air patrol status, criminal record (in state employment and licensing), gender identity or expression, genetic information, intellectual disability, learning disability, marital status, mental disability (past or present), national origin, physical disability (including blindness), race, religious creed, retaliation for previously opposed discrimination or coercion, sex (pregnancy or sexual harassment), sexual orientation, veteran status or workplace hazards to reproductive systems, unless there is a bona fide occupational qualification excluding persons in any of the aforementioned protected classes.

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**FAFSA COMPLETION CHALLENGE RFP 2020
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Overview: The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) in partnership with the CT College & Career Readiness Alliance ([CCCCRA](#)) is challenging all Connecticut school districts to raise their FAFSA completion rates among the Class of 2021 by at least 5%, compared to the Class of 2020. Additionally, the partnership seeks proposals for the FAFSA Completion Challenge from 21 Connecticut school districts who are eligible for additional support.

Purpose: Thousands of Connecticut students who are eligible for aid fail to file the FAFSA each year, leaving millions of unclaimed dollars that could support students' postsecondary education. A recent analysis by the financial media company NerdWallet found that of the Connecticut graduating Class of 2018, approximately 12,000 seniors failed to complete the FAFSA. NerdWallet estimated that slightly less than half of those FAFSA noncompleters would have been eligible for Pell Grants totaling \$17,000,000.

We know FAFSA completion is strongly associated with postsecondary enrollment and outcomes. In fact, 90% of high school seniors who complete the FAFSA attend college directly from high school, compared to just 55% of FAFSA noncompleters.

The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the obstacles many students and families face when completing the FAFSA. In Connecticut, FAFSA completions are down 16% compared to this time last year. This Challenge is also designed to help districts with the most need overcome these new and persistent obstacles while providing targeted support based on national best practices.

The FAFSA Completion Challenge aims to strengthen postsecondary access and enrollment by raising FAFSA completion rates among high school seniors.

FAFSA Completion Data: Each school's 2020-21 FAFSA completion rate will be measured as follows:

Total FAFSAs completed by high school seniors by June 30th, 2021 ÷ Number of high school seniors

Final Awards: In September 2021, The Governor and Commissioner of Education will publicly recognize four school districts who have demonstrated the greatest percentage point growth in high school FAFSA completions for the Class of 2021, compared to the Class of 2020:

- Governor's Award: Non-grant eligible schools - Greatest percentage growth
- Commissioner's Award: Non-grant eligible schools - Greatest percentage growth, runner-up
- Governor's Award: Grant eligible schools - Greatest percentage growth, \$10,000 *
- Commissioner's Award: Grant eligible schools - Greatest percentage growth, runner-up, \$5,000 *

** These monetary awards will help school districts continue their FAFSA completion work during the 2021-22 school year.*

Management and Technical Assistance: The FAFSA Completion Challenge will be managed out of CSDE's Office of Innovation and Partnerships.

Advisory Committee and Selection Process: To guide the FAFSA Completion Challenge, the CSDE will assemble an advisory committee of individuals with expertise in FAFSA completion strategies. The committee will review applications from eligible districts for selection and confirm winners of the prizes described above.

Eligibility Determination: The CSDE determined the list of 21 eligible applicants using 2019-2020 district FAFSA Completion Data and Free/Reduced Lunch Status Percentages. Specifically, high schools in these districts are eligible to apply if they meet the following criteria:

- FAFSA completion rates below 50% during the 2019-20 school year;
- Free- and reduced-lunch rates above 45% during the 2019-20 school year; and
- A senior class larger than 50 students in 2019-20.

Selection Criteria: The advisory committee will evaluate applications using the following criteria:

- Strength of a district's FAFSA completion strategy
- Willingness to use data to drive strategy and efforts
- Collaboration among stakeholders including, for example, K-12 schools, nonprofits, and higher education institutions (if possible) as well as possible participation from local government, the business community, faith-based organizations, the media, or other groups

Eligible Applicants: Applications will be accepted from districts listed below for their eligible schools*:

Ansonia Public Schools	East Haven Public Schools	Norwalk Public Schools
Area Cooperative Educational Services (ACES)	Hartford Public Schools	Norwich Free Academy
Bridgeport Public Schools	Meriden Public Schools	Plainfield Public Schools
Capital Region Education Council (CREC)	Naugatuck Public Schools	Putnam Public Schools
CT Technical Education and Career System	New Britain Public Schools	Waterbury Public Schools
Danbury Public Schools	New Haven Public Schools	West Haven Public Schools
East Hartford Public Schools	New London Public Schools	Windham Public Schools

*Eligible schools within districts are listed [here](#). Districts should submit one application on behalf of eligible schools.

Co-Applicants: Understanding that school districts may look to partner with community stakeholders, the application allows for a Co-Applicant. This Co-Applicant can be any entity committed to FAFSA completion.

Grant Eligible Districts: Up to 10 districts will be selected to be part of the *FAFSA Challenge Learning Community*. This will provide districts a seed grant and tailored support to spur innovation, while also allowing them to compete for monetary grant awards. Seed grants will be awarded on a per-eligible high school basis.

CSDE Reserves the Right: The CSDE reserves the right to withdraw this Request For Proposals after the proposals are received if the CSDE, in its sole discretion, determines that no applicant has met the requirements. The CSDE also reserves the right to accept a proposal subject to conditions that CSDE imposes.

Request For Proposals Grant Awards: Applicants are required to submit narratives to the CSDE electronically. The CSDE reserves the right to make changes to the RFP grant awards without discussion with the applicants. Therefore, proposals should represent the applicant's best effort to ensure a quality proposal from both a technical and cost standpoint. All awards are subject to the availability of state and federal funds. The grant award is not final until the award letter is executed. The CSDE will issue notification of the RFP award. The effective dates of the project will be set forth in the notification of the RFP award.

Freedom of Information Act: All of the information contained in a proposal submitted in response to this RFP is subject to the Freedom of Information Act Sections 1-200 et seq. The FOIA declares that, except as provided by federal law or state statute, records maintained or kept on file by any public agency (as defined in the statute) are public records, and every person has the right to inspect such records and receive a copy of such records.

Application Timeline and Submission Requirements:

- Call for Proposals: Wednesday, December 9th, 2020
- Prospective Applicant Webinar: Tuesday, December 15th, 2pm (will be recorded and posted online)
- Application Deadline: Wednesday, Jan 6th, 2021
- Award Notification: Monday, Jan 11th, 2021
- FAFSA Strategies Workshop: Tuesday, Jan 19th, 3:30 to 4:30 (attendance strongly encouraged)
- Implementation Period: Jan 11th – June 30th, 2021
- Grantee Final Report Deadline: July 31, 2021
- Prize Announcement: September 2021

Applications should be completed online at: https://sdect.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9ERB1YccmePfO2V
For questions, contact Chris Soto, FAFSA Completion Challenge director, at chris.soto@ct.gov

SUPPORT TO SELECTED SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS

Selected, grant-eligible schools and districts participating in the Challenge will benefit from the resources outlined below as part of the FAFSA Challenge Learning Community.



Seed Grants: Modest grants (awarded in Jan 2021) to districts to support innovative practices that will lead to increased FAFSA completion.



College Access Texting: Districts will be provided a personalized communication platform between schools and students to enable tailored reminders about key dates/steps in the process.



Counselor Collaboration: Virtual gatherings and a venue for counselors to collaborate and share successes, challenges, and promising practices.



Communications: Information about the importance of the FAFSA, as well as reminders about key dates and steps in the process, leveraging multiple communications platforms.



Data Tracking: Access to aggregate, and student-level data about FAFSA completion, empowering educators with information to then target student support.



Resources: Tools to support students, families, and educators. A compilation of resources and contacts to community partners and financial experts to support FAFSA completion.



Prize Awards: Modest grants (awarded in fall 2021) to districts showing the largest gains in FAFSA completion in 2020-21 to support continued FAFSA efforts in 2021-22.

FAFSA COMPLETION CHALLENGE APPLICATION NARRATIVE

- 1. Strategy:** Describe how your district intends to use funds in order to raise FAFSA completion rates among high school seniors by at least 5% for the period of October 1, 2020, through June 30, 2021, compared to the Class of 2020. Give particular attention to your strategies supporting students in a virtual environment and your strategy to close FAFSA completion gaps between schools within the district – if they exist. Also consider addressing topics such as planning, target audiences, implementation activities, general timeline, FAFSA completion assistance, increased awareness, marketing and promotion, use of technology, and media engagement.
(500 word max or 3,000 characters)
- 2. Experience:** Briefly describe what you have done to encourage FAFSA completion since the FAFSA was made available on October 1st. (100 word max or 600 characters)
- 3. Use of Data:** How does your district use data to understand how many students are completing the FAFSA? How will you use it in real-time during October 2020 through June 2021 to guide your FAFSA completion work? (150 word max or 900 characters)
- 4. Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Please identify all organizations in your education ecosystem that are collaborating in your district's FAFSA completion initiative and explain their role. At minimum, partnerships can include K-12 schools, nonprofit organizations, and local higher education institutions. Other partners may include local government, the business community, faith-based organizations, the media, or other groups. Describe the structure and/or mechanisms you use to coordinate among partners. Highlight any existing structures or resources that your district can leverage. Give particular attention to how you will use and leverage the seed grant with partners to maximize success.
(250 word max or 1,500 characters)

COMPLIANCE

To the best of my knowledge and belief, all the information and data in this agreement are true and correct. I further certify the following, check all:

- We acknowledge and agree that the failure to comply with all Assurances and Certifications in this application, all relevant provisions and requirements of the CARES Act, Pub. L. No. 116-136 (March 27, 2020), or any other applicable law or regulation may result in liability under the False Claims Act, 31 U.S.C. § 3729, et seq.; OMB Guidelines to Agencies on Government wide Debarment and Suspension (Nonprocurement) in 2 CFR part 180, as adopted and amended as regulations of the Department in 2 CFR part 3485; and 18 USC § 1001, as appropriate.
- All ESSER funds will be used for activities allowable under section 18003(d) of Division B of the CARES Act. No funds shall be used: to subsidize or offset executive salaries and benefits of individuals who are not employees of our district; for expenditures related to state or local teacher or faculty unions or associations.
- We shall provide equitable services as required under 18005 of Division B of the CARES Act, including provision of equitable services to students and teachers in non-public schools located within our LEA in the same manner as provided under section 1117 of the ESEA, as determined through timely and meaningful consultation with representatives of non-public schools.
- Our public school district shall: 1) maintain control of funds for the services and assistance provided to a non-public school under the ESSER Fund; 2) have title to materials, equipment, and property purchased with ESSER funds; and 3) ensure that services to a non-public school with ESSER funds will be provided by a public agency directly, or through contract with, another public or private entity.
- Our district shall provide reports as may be required by the CSDE which could include but are not limited to: the methodology we use(d) to provide services or assistance to students and staff in both public and non-public schools; the uses of funds (by our district and/or other entities) and demonstration of their compliance with Section 18003(d), such as any use of funds addressing the digital divide, including securing access to home-based connectivity and remote-use devices, related issues in supporting remote learning for all students, including disadvantaged populations.
- All requests for payment shall be based upon allowable purposes and made in accordance with cash management principles.
- Our district shall cooperate with any examination of records with respect to such ESSER funds by making records available for inspection, production, and examination, and authorized individuals available for interview and examination, upon the request of (i) the United States Department of Education and/or its Inspector General; or (ii) any other federal agency, commission, or department in the lawful exercise of its jurisdiction and authority.
- We will comply with the Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards (Uniform Guidance) requirements in Subpart D-Post Federal Award Requirements (2 CFR §§200.300-345) and Subpart E-Cost Principles (2 CFR §§200.400-475), which states that (ESSER) funds must be used for purposes that are reasonable, necessary, and allocable under the CARES Act.
- We will comply with the provisions of all applicable acts, regulations and assurances; the following provisions of Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR) 34 CFR parts 76, 77, 81, 82, 84, 97, 98, and 99; the OMB Guidelines to Agencies on Government wide Debarment and Suspension (Nonprocurement) in 2 CFR part 180, as adopted and amended as regulations of the Department in 2 CFR part 3485; and the Uniform Guidance in 2 CFR part 200, as adopted and amended as regulations of the Department in 2 CFR part 3474.

EXECUTIVE ORDER 7R, [\(full order here\)](#)

Select one:

- To the greatest extent practicable, we have continued to pay our employees and contractors during this period of any disruptions or closures related to coronavirus.

- We have NOT been able to continue payments to our employees and contractors during this period of any disruptions or closures related to coronavirus.

The reasons include:

Continued Payment of Public School Staff. In recognition of the fact that schools are required to provide a broad and constantly changing spectrum of services to students and families and will need to reengage students as quickly as possible upon resuming classes, school districts shall continue to employ or restore to employment if already laid off, and pay school staff who are directly employed by the local or regional board of education, including but not limited to teachers, paraprofessionals and other support staff, cafeteria staff, clerical staff, and custodial workers, to the greatest extent practicable. Local and regional boards of education may require school staff to provide services during the period of closure to the extent consistent with state and federal laws, including any applicable Executive Orders, guidance, or public health recommendations, and shall not be required to continue such employment if the staff member secures other employment, or if the staff member would have been separated for reasons other than circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nothing in this order shall affect the ability of the local or regional board of education to reduce the number of staff members prior to the start of the 2020-2021 school year due to budget reductions or as otherwise necessary outside of the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, in compliance with current legal requirements.

Preservation of Student Transportation Services and Special Education Providers. To the extent that a board of education, or in cases where the municipality holds the contract, the municipality with agreement from the board of education, determines that a contract related to student transportation or the provision of special education services by a public special education provider or an approved private special education provider requires amendment to more accurately reflect the actual costs incurred during the duration of the public health and civil preparedness emergencies, all parties shall promptly negotiate amendments to such contracts with student transportation providers and/or special education providers with terms that are consistent with the goals of: (1) sustaining continuity of service when school resumes; (2) continuing (a) to make tuition payments to special education providers so that they may compensate their active employees and provide them health insurance and (b) to make payments to transportation providers so that they may compensate their active employees and provide them health insurance; and (3) requiring the contracted company to attest and provide reasonable documentation of the fact that it is charging only the actual and reasonable cost of sustaining wage and health insurance payments for active employees and/or fleet while also engaging best efforts to avoid unnecessary costs. Such continued compensation and health insurance for staff or others providing special education and transportation services and employees shall be continued to the greatest extent practicable -- whether full-time or part-time -- at rates commensurate to those paid and provided immediately prior to the declaration of these public health and civil preparedness emergencies, whether or not services are actually or immediately rendered. Nothing in this provision shall allow for contracted companies to be enriched beyond the actual and reasonable costs incurred for the purposes set forth above.

ASSURANCES

The Local Educational Agency (LEA) hereby assures the State Educational Agency (SEA) that the LEA follows all regulations applicable for CSDE, including those outlined below.

Check all:

- Each program will be administered in accordance with applicable statutes, regulations, program plans, and applications;
- Control of funds and property acquired using program funds will be maintained and administered by the appropriate public agency;
- Fiscal control and fund accounting procedures will be used to ensure proper disbursement of, and accounting for, federal funds;
- The LEA will make reports to the state agency or board and to the Secretary as may be needed for the state agency or board and the Secretary to perform their duties under each program, and each LEA will maintain records (as required in Section 443) and provide access to those records as the state board or agency Secretary deems necessary to carry out their responsibilities;
- The LEA will provide opportunities for the participation in, planning for, and operation of each program by teachers, parents, and other interested agencies, organizations, and individuals;
- Applications, evaluations, plans, or reports related to each program will be made available to parents and the public;
- Facilities constructed under any program will be consistent with overall state construction plans and standards and with the requirements of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 in order to ensure that the facilities are accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities;
- The LEA has adopted effective procedures for acquiring and disseminating information and research regarding the programs and for adopting, where appropriate, promising educational practices to teachers and administrators participating in each program; and
- None of the funds expended under any applicable program will be used to acquire equipment if such acquisition results in a direct financial benefit to any organization representing the interests of the purchasing entity or its employees.

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S GENERAL EDUCATION PROVISIONS ACT (GEPA)
SECTION 427 REQUIREMENT**

Section 427 of GEPA requires each applicant for funds to include in its application a description of the steps the applicant proposes to take to ensure equitable access to, and participation in, its federally-assisted program for students, teachers, and other program beneficiaries with special needs. The statute highlights six types of barriers that can impede equitable access or participation: gender, race, national origin, color, disability, or age.

For GEPA Section 427 documentation, see the following:

[U.S. Department of Education's General Education Provisions Act \(GEPA\) - Section 427](#)

Provide examples of how your district will address the Section 427 requirement:

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION PLAN

IF A CURRENT AFFIRMATIVE ACTION PLAN IS ON FILE WITH THE CONNECTICUT STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, COMPLETE THE STATEMENT WRITTEN BELOW AND SUBMIT AS PART OF THE PROPOSAL.

IF A CURRENT AFFIRMATIVE ACTION PLAN IS NOT ON FILE, COMPLETE THE AFFIRMATIVE ACTION PACKET AND SUBMIT AS PART OF THE PROPOSAL (these forms are found at URL: https://www.ct.gov/chro/lib/chro/Notification_to_Bidders.pdf).

**CERTIFICATION THAT A CURRENT AFFIRMATIVE
ACTION PLAN IS ON FILE**

I, the undersigned authorized official, hereby certify that the current Affirmative Action Plan of the applying organization/agency is on file with the Connecticut State Department of Education. The Affirmative Action Plan is, by reference, part of this application.

Signature of Authorized Official:

Date:

Print Name of Authorized Official:

APPLICANT SIGNATURE

I, the undersigned authorized official; hereby certify that these assurances shall be fully implemented.

Name (typed): _____

Title (typed): _____

Date:

SCORING RUBRIC CRITERIA

1. Strategy (60)		
Community Awareness		10
Virtual Strategies		20
Implementation		30
2. Experience (10)		
Fall 2020 Efforts		10
3. Use of Data (20)		
Use of EdSight Secure		10
Data to inform practices		10
4. Cross-Sector Collaboration (30)		
Collaborating Partners		5
Existing Infrastructure		10
Leveraging Resources		15
	TOTAL Points	120

Total Score _____ (maximum 120 points)