

Statewide FAFSA Completion Report

2022-23



August 2023

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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 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 2022-23 school year, Connecticut ran its third 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 last two years, 57 schools participated in the 2022-23 Challenge and collectively raised their completion rate by 6.9 percentage points from 51.8 percent in 2021-22 to 58.7 percent in 2022-23. Moreover, the improvement among the Challenge schools of 6.9 percentage points was greater than the statewide overall improvement of 5.4 percentage points. For the third 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 2022-23 school year, the Governor's Office and Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) launched the third Connecticut FAFSA Challenge, a college and 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 three years, the state of Connecticut has invested approximately \$1 million in FAFSA completion, identifying it as essential to 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:

- a public [FAFSA completion dashboard on EdSight](#) which shows completion rates at the district and school levels, and a secure report for authorized users that provides student-level completion status;

- passage of Public Act (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
- passage of Public Act 23-204, which requires the completion of the FAFSA or alternative institutional aid application as a high school graduation requirement.

Amidst these pieces of legislation, the Connecticut FAFSA Challenge represents a steady and powerful 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.

Building on the success of the first two years of the program where 26 high schools collectively increased their FAFSA completion rate by 4 percentage points in the 2020-21 school year and 40 schools increased their rate by more than 8 percentage points in the 2021-22 school year, the CSDE kicked off the 2022-23 FAFSA Challenge with the same three goals:

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 subgroups and school communities.
3. **Spark Innovation:** Support schools in pursuing creative ideas to promote FAFSA completion.

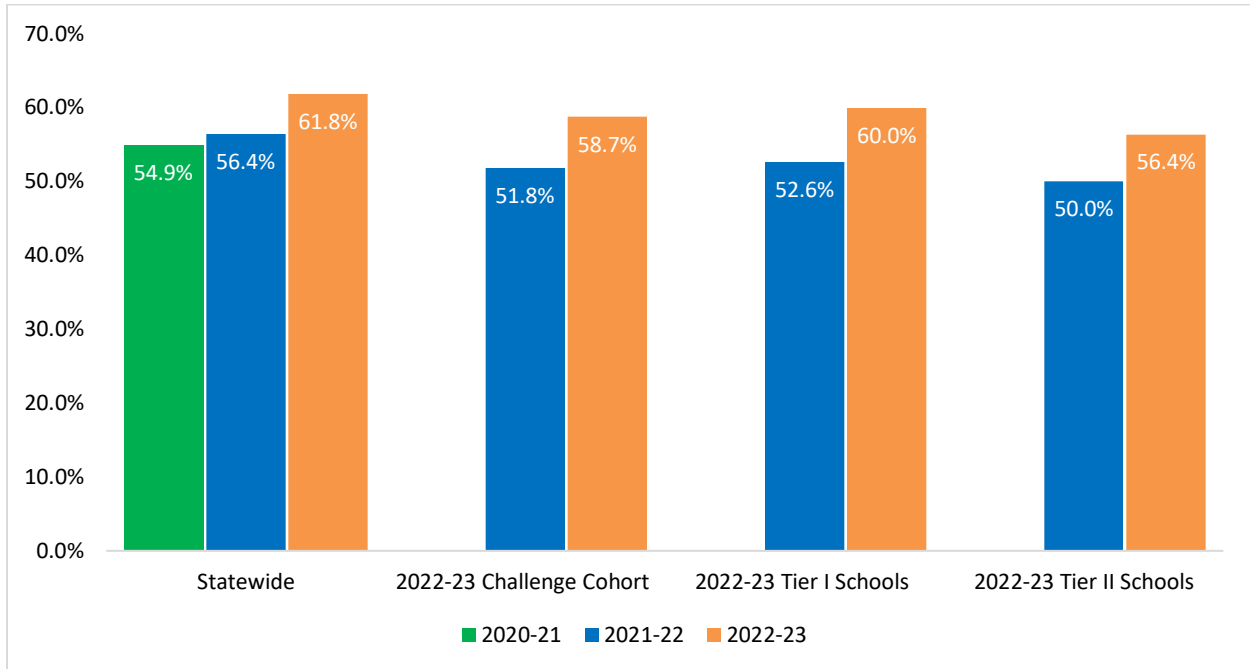
Participating schools (“Challenge schools”) were allowed to opt into one of two tiers of support in order to improve their rates. Tier I schools were afforded a modest microgrant, access to FAFSA trainings provided by uAspire, and access to aggregate and student-level data about FAFSA completion through 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, nine of these Tier II schools received coaching and other professional development from Rise Network staff.

Results

This report presents results of the third Connecticut FAFSA Challenge for Challenge schools and for the state writ large, while also disaggregating completion status amongst students eligible for free- or reduced-priced meals. Overall, schools participating in the FAFSA Challenge collectively increased their rates by almost 7 percentage points from 51.8 percent to 58.7 percent. Tier I schools improved by an average of 7.4 percentage points, from 52.6 percent to 60.0 percent while Tier II schools improved from

50.0 percent to 56.4 percent, a gain of 6.4 percentage points. Figure 1 shows average completion rates at the state, cohort, and tier levels. For the third time, Challenge schools showed significant improvements and growth at a rate that exceeded the state average.

Figure 1: Connecticut FAFSA Completion Rate by Cohort, 2022-2023



Of the 57 Challenge schools, 37 met or exceeded their goal of improving completion rates by 5 percentage points. Of the 42 Tier I schools, 28 (67%) met or surpassed their 2022 FAFSA Completion goal while 9 of the 15 Tier II schools (60%) 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: 2022-23 FAFSA Challenge Results, Tier I

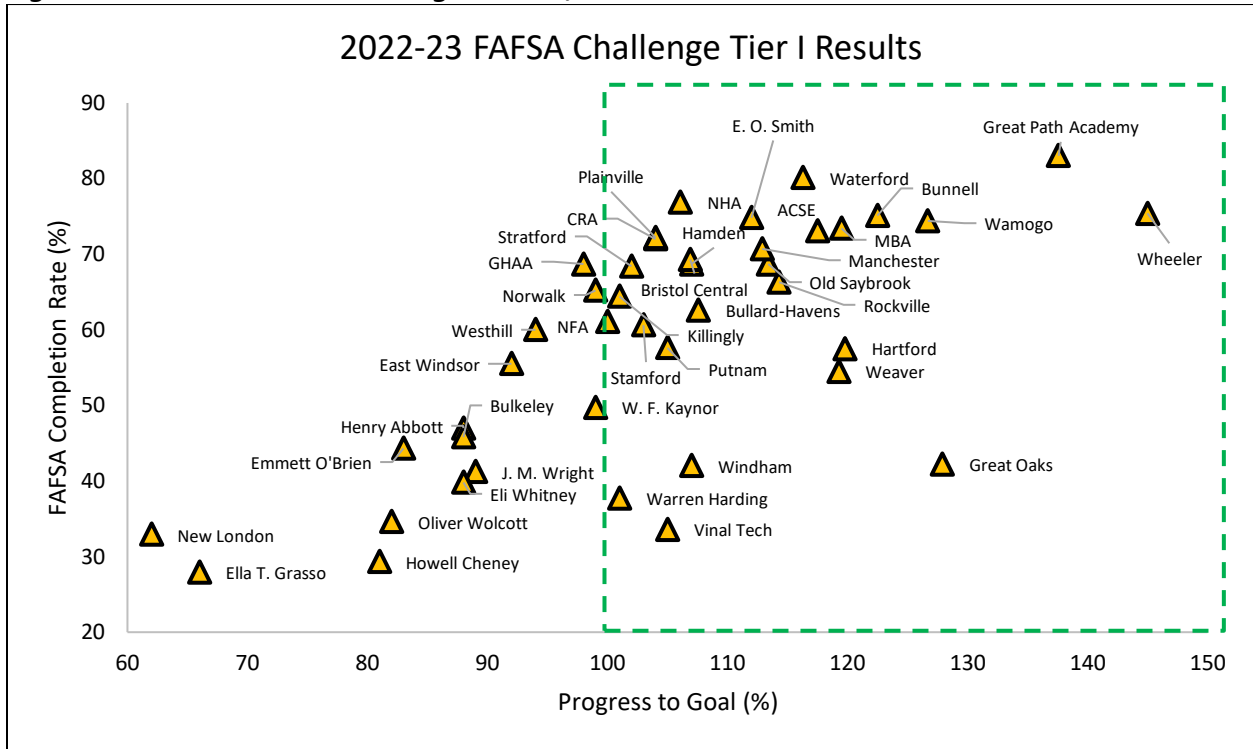
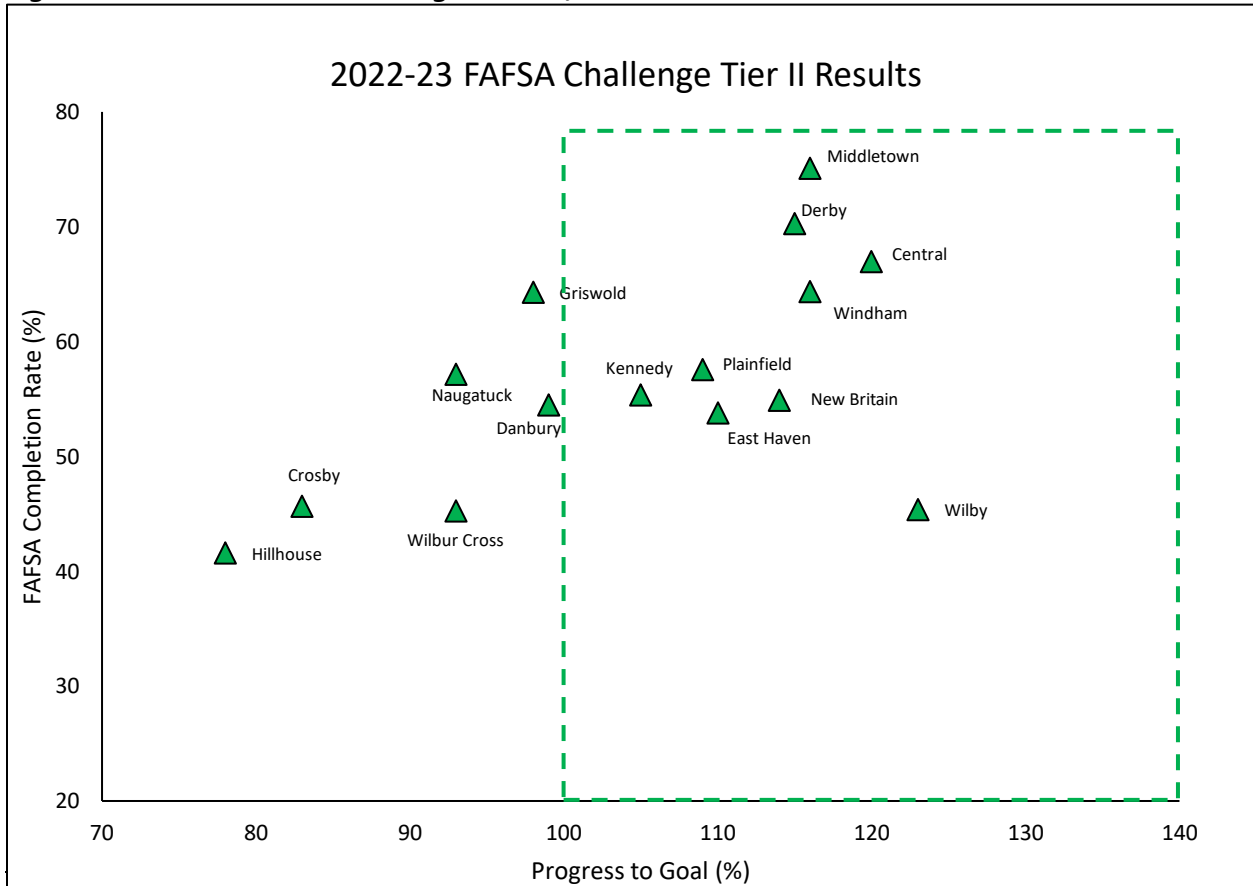
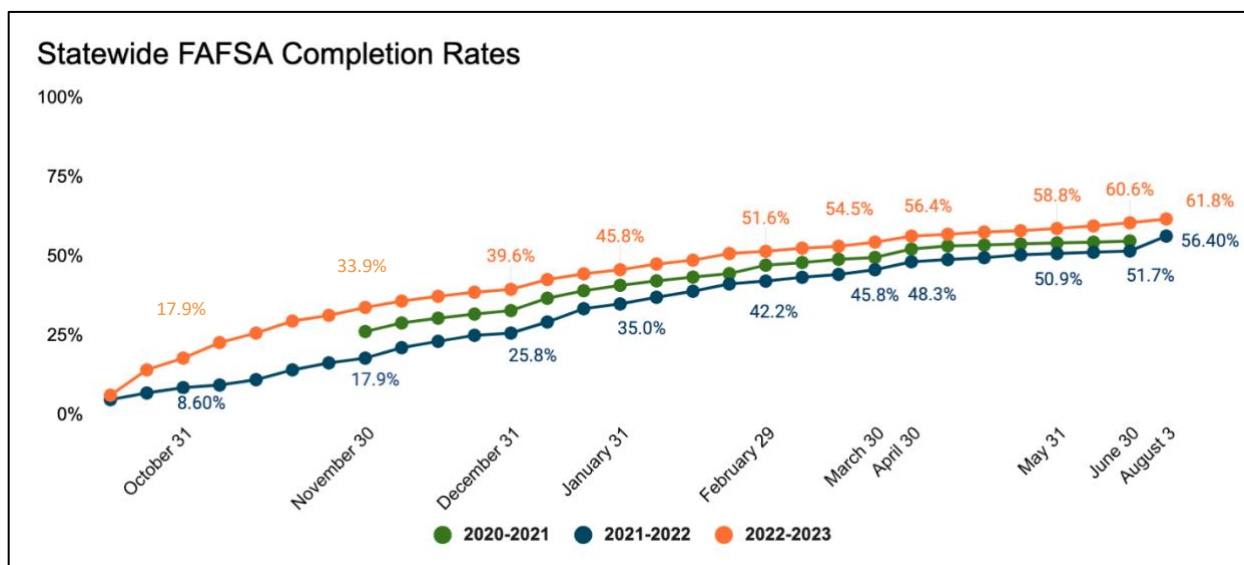


Figure 3: 2022-23 FAFSA Challenge Results, Tier II



At the state level, Connecticut’s FAFSA completion rate ended in August 2023 at 61.8%, more than 5 percentage points higher than the statewide rate in August 2022 (56.4%). Figure 4¹ shows that Connecticut high schools began the 2022-23 school year with an exceptionally strong start, and by November 2023, the completion rate of 2022-23 cohort was almost double the rate of the 2021-22 cohort in that same month. Nationally, FAFSA completion exhibited strong ramp up effects as well, and Connecticut likely benefitted from a larger cohort of FAFSA Challenge schools as well as a cadre of trained educators who had participated in previous iterations of the Challenge.

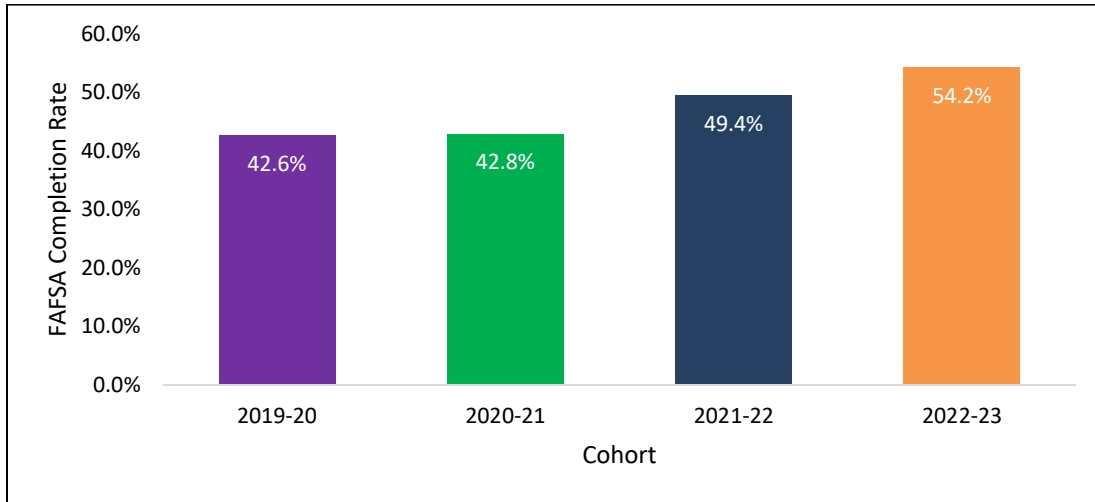
Figure 4: Statewide FAFSA Completion Rates, 2020-21 vs 2021-22 vs 2022-23



Finally, this report examines FAFSA completion amongst students eligible for free- or reduced-priced meals (FRPM). Figure 5 shows the completion rate for FRPM students increased by nearly 5 percentage points between 2021-22 and 2022-23. The statewide FAFSA completion rate of 54.2% for students eligible for FRPM is nearly identical to the rate for FRPM students attending one of the 57 FAFSA Challenge schools this year (54.4%) and slightly higher than the rate for FRPM students attending a non-Challenge high school (54.0%).

¹ Data for October and November 2020 unavailable

Figure 5: FAFSA Completion Rates Amongst Students Eligible For FRPM



Conclusion

The success of the Connecticut FAFSA Challenge over the last three years demonstrates the power that school counselors, administrators, and other educators have in preparing students for their college and career aspirations. In that spirit, the Connecticut Governor’s Office and the State Department of Education are continuing the FAFSA Challenge during the 2023-24 school year, beginning in September 2023, in an effort to once again raise the bar and challenge participating schools to increase their rates by 5 percentage points. In doing so, it is the state’s goal to link more deserving and interested students to various forms of financial aid and chip away at, if not eliminate, a major hurdle in their quest to pursuing a higher education.