

Connecticut FAFSA Challenge 2022-2023 Overview Document and School Application

[Information Webinar](#): September 21, 2022

[Application Due](#): September 30, 2022



An initiative of:

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&

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Table of Contents

FAFSA Challenge 2022-2023 Overview.....	4
A. Purpose	4
B. FAFSA Completion Measurement.....	5
C. Support for Selected Schools.....	5
D. Eligibility Determination.....	6
E. Eligible Applicants	6
F. Application Timeline and Submission Requirements	7
G. Final Awards.....	7
H. Best Practices for Spending FAFSA Challenge Microgrant Funds	8
FAFSA Challenge Application Narrative.....	10
Scoring Rubric	11
Compliance.....	12
Assurances.....	13
Supplemental Information	14

FAFSA Challenge 2022-2023 Overview

In January 2021, Connecticut launched its first ever Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Challenge in 26 high schools across 16 school districts. The Challenge was designed to strengthen postsecondary access and enrollment by raising Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion rates among high school seniors. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, at the time of the 2020 RFP release, FAFSA completion rates were down by 16 percent. Following the success of the pilot year, 40 schools participated in the 2021-22 Challenge, collectively raising their completion rate by 8 percentage points. As a cohort, schools that opted to receive more intensive resources and support - including larger microgrants and human capital investments through trainings and professional development opportunities - saw average year-over-year gains as large as 10 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 aid to defray the costs of attending a postsecondary institution.

The Connecticut Office of the Governor and the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) are launching the state's third FAFSA Challenge this September. As in previous years, the FAFSA Challenge will provide microgrants, trainings, professional development, and other resources to 73 eligible high schools serving high-needs students as a means of helping seniors access the financial aid they deserve to pursue a postsecondary education. This year, the state is charging all participating Challenge schools to increase their completion rates by 5 percentage points, relative to the class of 2022.

A. Purpose

The FAFSA Challenge aims to strengthen postsecondary access and enrollment by raising FAFSA completion rates among high school seniors. Thousands of Connecticut students who are eligible for federal student aid fail to submit the FAFSA each year, leaving millions of unclaimed dollars that could support students' postsecondary education. The FAFSA is a critical access milestone in preparing high school students to pursue a higher education. Administered by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Federal Student Aid, the FAFSA provides hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to Connecticut students.

This is critically important, in part, because more than 70 percent of Connecticut jobs require some form of education beyond a high school diploma.¹ While many students aspire to a higher education, less than half of Connecticut high school graduates will earn a college degree within six years of graduating from high school. College enrollment and completion data also reveal opportunity gaps for historically marginalized subgroups.² Completion of the FAFSA is one of the best predictors of whether or not seniors will enroll in college; students who complete the FAFSA are 84 percent more likely to immediately enroll in postsecondary education.³ However, only 56.4 percent of Connecticut's Class of 2022 completed the FAFSA by June 2022.

¹ <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/Office-of-the-Governor/News/20201028-Governors-Workforce-Council-Strategic-Plan.pdf>

² https://public-edsight.ct.gov/performance/college-enrollment-dashboard?language=en_US

³ [National FAFSA Completion Rates for High School Seniors and Graduates](#), National College Attainment Network.

B. FAFSA Completion Measurement

Each school's 2022-23 FAFSA completion rate will be measured as follows:

$$\frac{\text{Total FAFSAs completed by high school seniors (including early graduates)}}{\text{Number of high school seniors}}$$

C. Support for Selected Schools

Eligible schools may apply to receive one of two tiers of support:

Tier 1: Basic Support	Tier 2: Intensive Support
<p>Tier 1 provides resources for schools who need financial support to boost FAFSA completion rates but choose not to participate in the more comprehensive Tier 2 program.</p> <p>In Tier 1, schools can apply to receive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A microgrant of at least \$5,000, scaled to senior class size ● Participation in the FAFSA Challenge Community of Practice (attendance optional)*, where the RISE Network will hold monthly gatherings for school staff to collaborate and share successes, challenges, and promising practices ● Access to aggregate and student-level data about FAFSA completion (EdSight, Online Portal), empowering educators with information to then target student support. <p>*Schools that opt into Tier I will be invited to (and are encouraged to attend!) all monthly Community of Practice meetings with their school peers, but it is not a requirement.</p>	<p>Tier 2 provides a larger set of resources for schools who wish to commit more time to improving FAFSA completion, invest in their own professional development, and learn from other schools and experts.</p> <p>In Tier 2, schools can apply to receive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A larger microgrant of at least \$7,500, scaled to senior class size ● Participation in the FAFSA Challenge Community of Practice (attendance required*), where the RISE Network will hold monthly gatherings for school staff to collaborate and share successes, challenges, and promising practices ● Training, in-person coaching, and professional development opportunities for school staff on FAFSA completion ● Access to aggregate and student-level data about FAFSA completion (EdSight, Online Portal), empowering educators with information to then target student support. <p>*Schools that apply for Tier 2 will be expected to attend monthly Community of Practice meetings with their school peers.</p>

D. Eligibility Determination

The CSDE determined the list of 73 eligible high schools, potential “Challenge Schools,” using 2021-22 school FAFSA completion data, free- or reduced-price meals status percentages, and senior class size. Specifically, high schools are eligible to apply if they meet the following criteria:

- FAFSA completion rate for all students is below 57 percent for the 2021-22 school year, percentage of students receiving free- or reduced-price meals is greater than or equal to 20 percent, and the senior class was greater than or equal to 50 students in 2021-22; or
- FAFSA completion rate for students eligible for free- or reduced-price meals was below 57 percent during the 2021-22 school year and their free- or reduced-price meal cohort size was greater than or equal to 40 students.

Individual schools that meet either of the criteria above may apply to participate. Winners in the 2022 FAFSA Challenge will be ineligible to apply this year but may reapply in future Challenges.

E. Eligible Applicants

Schools that meet the eligibility criteria outlined in Section D will be invited to apply. Districts with eligible schools are listed below. Please see a list of eligible high schools on the [CSDE website](#). **Applications must be submitted by an eligible school. For districts that have multiple eligible high schools, each high school should submit its own application.**

Branford School District (1 school)	New London School District (1 school)
Bridgeport School District (2 schools)	Newington School District (1 school)
Bristol School District (1 school)	North Stonington School District (1 school)
Capitol Region Education Council (CREC) (2 schools)	Norwalk School District (1 school)
CT Technical Education and Career System (17 schools)	Norwich Free Academy District (1 school)
Danbury School District (1 school)	Old Saybrook School District (1 school)
Derby School District (1 school)	Plainfield School District (1 school)
East Haven School District (1 school)	Plainville School District (1 school)
East Windsor School District (1 school)	Plymouth School District (1 school)
Goodwin University Educational Resources (1 school)	Putnam School District (1 school)
Great Oaks Charter District (1 school)	Regional School District 06 (1 school)
Griswold School District (1 school)	Regional School District 15 (1 school)
Hamden School District (1 school)	Regional School District 19 (1 school)
Hartford School District (5 schools)	Stamford School District (2 schools)
Killingly School District (1 school)	Stratford School District (2 schools)
Ledyard School District (1 school)	Vernon School District (1 school)
Manchester School District (1 school)	Waterbury School District (3 schools)
Middletown School District (1 school)	Waterford School District (1 school)
Montville School District (1 school)	West Haven School District (1 school)
Naugatuck School District (1 school)	Windham School District (1 school)
New Britain School District (2 schools)	Windsor School District (1 school)
New Haven School District (4 schools)	

The 2021-22 FAFSA Challenge winners will be [posted online](#) after September 16, 2022.

F. Application Timeline and Submission Requirements

Activity:	Date:
Announcement of 2021-22 FAFSA Challenge winners	September 16, 2022
Call for 2022-23 proposals	September 12, 2022
Prospective applicant webinar - register here	September 21, 2022
Application deadline	September 30, 2022
Award notification	October 7, 2022
Performance Matters Convening in Hartford (optional)	October 13, 2022
Kickoff event (all Challenge participants invited)	October 18, 2022
Implementation period	October 2022-August 2023
Announcement of 2022-23 FAFSA Challenge winners	September 2023

Applications should be completed [online](#). For questions, contact Ajit Gopalakrishnan, Chief Performance Officer, at ajit.gopalakrishnan@ct.gov or John Scianimanico, Director of Special Projects, at john.scianimanico@ct.gov.

G. Final Awards

In September 2023, the Governor and Commissioner of Education will publicly recognize schools for their growth and overall achievement in boosting FAFSA completion rates for the Class of 2023, compared to the Class of 2022:

Category	Prize
CT FAFSA Challenge High Schools	
Challenge Award: Awarded to schools that boost FAFSA completion rates by at least 5 percentage points	Minimum of \$1,000, School banner
Monthly Spotlight: Awarded to a FAFSA Challenge school that 1. Showed the highest month-to-month growth in FAFSA completion rates 2. Introduced a promising practice to increase FAFSA completion rates.	Recognition on CSDE website

**These monetary awards will help schools continue their FAFSA completion work during the 2022-23 school year.*

H. Best Practices for Spending FAFSA Challenge Microgrant Funds

Every Tier I and II school must commit to implementing at least 2 promising practices from the table below. Schools in last year's FAFSA Challenge pursued a variety of strategies to support their FAFSA goals, with these initiatives yielding some of the best results for engaging students and families and developing a FAFSA culture in the school community.

Best Practice	Summary of Practices	Potential Expenses
FAFSA Task Force	Collaborative team of counselors and teachers providing one-on-one support to students and families with FAFSA completion. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Group of educators with caseload of students assigned ● Coordinator of program ● Biweekly meetings with team to review data, celebrate successes and set next steps with student caseload 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Staff stipends/hourly rate ● Correspondence to families sharing the strategy.
Student Incentives & Celebrations	Student prize drawings and giveaways to increase student engagement with FAFSA completion, including senior class celebrations for those who completed the FAFSA. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● FAFSA breakfast ● Refer a friend ● Monthly raffles ● Food Truck Celebration ● Classroom Competitions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Flyers/marketing ● Swag/incentives ● Refreshments
Family Engagement	Communication with families to provide additional information and resources to educate families on the importance of FAFSA completion. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Saturday family FAFSA workshops ● Evening events ● Communication to parents (letters from coaches, email blasts for events, postcards) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Flyers/marketing ● Guest Speakers on Financial Aid/FAFSA ● Refreshments ● Incentives/Raffles
Culture- Building Activities	Consistent opportunities to establish FAFSA culture among school communities. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Posters with financial aid vocabulary ● Photos displayed when applications completed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Posters for hallways (multiple languages) ● T-shirts for completed

Best Practice	Summary of Practices	Potential Expenses
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Classroom competitions (FSA ID, Applications completed) ● Weekly announcements ● Staff Awareness ● Classroom Activities (Financial Aid Bingo w/prizes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● applications ● Checklists for teacher classrooms
Marketing & Promotion	<p>Intentional spaces in school buildings to promote and highlight FAFSA completion and FAFSA Campaign initiatives.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Postcards home ● Posters in classrooms ● Flyers to promote events and incentives ● FAFSA family toolkit ● T-shirts for students/staff #FAFSA to promote ● School Announcements ● Weekly raffles announced ● Announcements/tables at sporting events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Poster/postcard printing ● Mailing expenses ● T-shirts to promote completion ● Flyers for parents/students at sporting events
Community Partnerships	<p>Collaboration with community-based organizations including community colleges to increase FAFSA completion and support team goals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In-kind gifts from local businesses ● FAFSA Fridays partnering with local community college ● CAPFAA partnership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Staff stipends/hourly rates for community outreach ● Postcard/poster printing for collaboration events

FAFSA Challenge Application Narrative

Directions: All eligible schools wishing to [apply](#) for resources through the FAFSA Challenge must complete Questions 1-4 in [the online application](#). **Applications must be completed by school-level staff with input from district staff.** Schools are also encouraged to solicit input from an outside partner (i.e., community-based organization, institution of higher education, or another partner). Schools seeking to receive Tier 2 resources must complete Question 5 as well in order to be considered. Please keep each response limited to 300 words max (2,000 characters).

Applicant Information:

Name of School-Level Staff Completing Application:

District:

High School:

Title:

Email:

District Point of Contact Name:

District Point of Contact Title:

District Point of Contact Email:

- 1. Use of Data:** What was your school's FAFSA completion rate in 2021-22 (you can use [EdSight tool](#) for school FAFSA completion rates) and what is your goal for the 2022-23 academic year? How will your district use real-time [data posted on EdSight](#) during October 2022 through June 2023 to guide your FAFSA completion work?
- 2. Strategy and Commitment to Equity:** Describe how your school intends to use its microgrant to raise FAFSA completion rates among high school seniors by at least 5 percentage points for the period of October 2022 through August 2023, compared to the Class of 2022. Explain how the school will use new resources to pursue new and innovative strategies, promote equity, and close opportunity gaps.
- 3. Implementation:** Summarize key implementation milestones in the fall, winter, and spring. Additionally, please indicate at least one best practice your school commits to implementing over the following year using your microgrant.
- 4. Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Please identify all organizations that are collaborating in your school's FAFSA completion initiative and explain their role. **High schools are strongly encouraged to partner with an outside organization, whether it be a community-based organization (CBO), institution of higher education, or other college access organization.**
- 5. [For Tier 2: Intensive Support Applicants Only]:** Please (1) explain why your school is interested in the more comprehensive set of resources provided in Tier 2 -- larger microgrants; monthly Community of Practice meetings with other Challenge schools; and professional development, training, and coaching opportunities on FAFSA completion -- and (2) provide the names and roles of at least one additional team member from your school who will participate in the recurring Community of Practice sessions. Schools should plan to send at least 2 participants to each Community of Practice session.

Scoring Rubric

District: _____ Tier 1 Applicant

School: _____ Tier 2 Applicant

Overview: For each of the five application review criteria outlined below, applications will be scored at three levels, providing minimal, moderate, or strong evidence as defined below.

- **Minimal Evidence:** Applicant fails to offer detailed or compelling responses in alignment with review criteria. Application raises significant questions or concerns.
- **Moderate Evidence:** Applicant offers some strong and compelling details; however, it also raises some questions or leaves certain elements feeling incomplete.
- **Strong Evidence:** Applicant provides clear, detailed, and compelling responses that build confidence in the applicant’s plan and abilities to pursue that plan.

Application Review Criteria	Minimal Evidence	Moderate Evidence	Strong Evidence
Innovative Approach: Application presents new and creative ideas to support students and families in completing the FAFSA.	• 2 points	• 4 points	• 6 points
Actionable Approach: Application offers a clear implementation plan, indicating that the applicant is prepared to fully pursue proposed strategies and approaches.	• 2 points	• 4 points	• 6 points
Commitment to Equity: Application demonstrates a commitment to educational equity and meeting the individual needs of diverse learners and families.	• 1 point	• 2 points	• 3 points
Data-Driven Approach: Application shows a commitment to results and data-driven continuous improvement.	• 1 point	• 2 points	• 3 points
Capacity: Application outlines capacity to successfully implement FAFSA strategies, which may include school staff or collaborating with partner organizations.	• 2 points	• 4 points	• 6 points
Total Score (Range 8-24)	_____ / 24 total points		

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 CRRSA Act, 2021, Pub. L. 116-260 (December 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 Governmentwide 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 313 of the CRRSA Act, 2021. 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.
- 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 313, 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.
- 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 II) funds must be used for purposes that are reasonable, necessary, and allocable under the CRRSA 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 Governmentwide 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.

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 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.

Supplemental Information

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 provides 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.